

SHIGURUI

The tournament at Sunpu castle

Norio Nanjo

Norio was born in 1908 in Tokyo. After graduating from the Imperial University of Tokyo, Faculty of Law and Economics, he worked as a professor at both Chuo University and Kokugakuin University while he was writing his works.

He was especially known for the violence and intensity of his works, among which are numerous works of a historical nature. In 1956 he won the Naoki Literature Award for *Todaiki* (Devil of the Lighthouse). In 1982 he won the Yoshikawa Eiji Literature Award for *Saiko Nikki* (Saiko's Journal).

Many of his novels have been taken to the cinema and television. Shigurui was adapted into manga and anime with great success from critics and readers around the world.

Twenty-fourth day of the ninth month of the sixth year of the Kan'ei era (September 24, 1629). Sunrise at Sunpu Castle and a desolate atmosphere envelops everything. The tension is palpable in the air. This is the place where the greatest martial arts masters in the country have come to duel.

A devious snake, hiding under guise of Tadanaga, the great counselor of Suruga province, will kick off the tournament that is set to become the most important in Japan's history. Eleven battles will be held, in which participants will fight to the death with real swords, a thing very rare in time of peace.

When the struggle begins, the masters will plunge into an abyss of destruction that will cause rivers of blood and be remembered for centuries. At midnight, when all is over, the fortress will be empty and silent, inhabited only by the weary spirits of the fallen fighters.

It would be a mistake to understand this work as a simple samurai novel, since it combines the best of classical Japanese literature: passion, rancor, love, hate and... death. A superb story about the lowest instincts of the human being and about the causes that provoke them.

This is a historical novel that transcends history.

MUMYO SAKANAGARE

("The inverse flow of unawareness.")

I

Little is known for certain about the so-called "Kan'ei era tournament": neither when it took place, nor the participants, nor how its legend came about. But it is obvious that no historical facts support it. The official record of Tokugawa shows that on the day of the tournament, September 21 of the eleventh year of the Kan'ei era (1634), the third *shogun* Tokugawa Iemitsu¹ was not at Edo Castle², but visited a temple in Nikko. And it is unthinkable for such a tournament to be held in the castle garden in the absence of the *shogun*.

However, we cannot say for sure that this tournament held in the presence of the *shogun* is just a fiction born from the fantasy of a storyteller. As in many similar cases, a reality existed that seemed to repeat the pattern of these fights. And that pattern undoubtedly was the great tournament that took place on September 24th of the sixth year of the Kan'ei era (1629), at Sunpu Castle, in the presence of the great chancellor of Suruga Province, Tokugawa Tadanaga³.

Attendees were prohibited to spread details of the Sunpu tournament. One of the reasons, needless to say, was the fact that Tadanaga's territories were later seized on suspicion of treason and he was ordered to commit *seppuku*, although this was presented as a voluntary suicide; the other reason was the very essence of this unprecedented tournament, as it involved cruel and brutal fights to the death with real swords⁴.

During a period of peace of that kind, there were very few cases of confrontations with real swords. But what became unprecedented was a publicly organized tournament by a feudal lord of a large territory in which eleven duels to the death with real swords took place.

While acknowledging that Tadanaga had some sort of mental disorder, it is surprising that the veteran generals, under the command of Torii Naritsugu, the Tosa *daimyo*, appointed by Hidetada⁵, did nothing to

¹ Names of all the characters appear in Japanese order: the last name goes first, followed by the first name.

² Old name of Tokyo.

³ Brother of the *shogun* Tokugawa Iemitsu.

⁴ Instead of using wooden swords.

⁵ Tokugawa Hidetada, second *shogun* of the Tokugawa clan and father of Tadanaga.

dissuade him from such an act of violence. Perhaps Tadanaga's behavior had already reached such an extreme level that no subordinate could control it; or perhaps the period of the Sengoku wars (1467-1568), when massacres and killings were commonplace, had yet to fade away from the memory of common folk; either way, the atrocious tournament overcame all opposition and came to be held.

If we look closely at the events of these matches, we see that, of the eleven initial pairings, in eight of the duels one of the opponents slays his enemy, and in the remaining three both swordsmen die together. In the same way, in the so-called "Kan'ei era tournament" eleven fights also took place, of which eight ended in victory on one side, while the other three ended in a draw, so it is clear that it follows the same pattern.

During the celebration of the tournament, the white sand that extended through the south courtyard of the castle's interior became a sea of blood and the stench of rot floated in the air; even some samurai who were attending the tournament had to step aside to moan and vomit in secret. However, Tadanaga apparently watched it all from the beginning to the end, with his marked blue veins showing prominently on his pale forehead. In October of the tenth year of the Kan'ei era (1633), after Tadanaga moved to Kofu, the emissary of the *shogun*, Aoyama Yoshinari, arrived to take over Sunpu Castle.

—An act of a demon, — he muttered, then ordered all documents connected with the tournament to be burnt.

As a result, no official records are kept of that tournament. However, the secret writings left by those who watched the fights were passed on from hand to hand, and eventually became the main source of the legend of the "tournament of the Kan'ei era", which excites all those who listen to it, despite the violent bloodshed of the historical events.

Although the tournament started at the time of the snake (ten o'clock in the morning), from the moment the first two competitors pulled back the curtain on the east and west sides, and appeared in the combat area, a strange tension enveloped everyone present.

At the eastern end appeared Irako Seigen, about thirty years old, who, despite his extraordinary beauty, was blind in both eyes and had to drag his right foot quite a little as he walked. A mature woman, who seemed to be of the same age, of captivating beauty, accompanied the beautiful master of the sword, blind and crippled, to the curtain, but obviously she did not pass through it to enter the enclosure where the fight was held.

On the other side, the west, appeared Fujiki Gennosuke, probably about twenty-seven or twenty-eight years. In comparison with Seigen's sharp and tender features, he possessed an exceptional well-shaped face, although a certain sense of anguish was present on it. Furthermore, his left arm, severed at the base, was missing.

Gennosuke was also accompanied by a beautiful and elegant young woman of about twenty-one. While the attractiveness of the other woman brought out a slight feeling of lust in the chest of the young samurai present there, it was the refined beauty of this young woman who filled them with astonishment.

Two cripples and two beautiful women. Although this alone was more than enough to awake the curiosity of the samurai tournament attendees, out of nowhere came a rumor, which went around from one to another, that the two swordsmen had previously been partners in the same *dojo*. The woman accompanying Irako Seigen had been the concubine of their master, Iwamoto Kogan, and the young woman who came to Fujiki Gennosuke's side was Kogan's only daughter and Irako Seigen's lover.

These four people, bound together by such unique ties, separated each from his companion to the east and west and, after crossing the curtain, the two men stood face to face, their bodies equally crippled, prepared to fight each other with their *katanas*.

The one who attracted the most curiosity and interest from the audience was Irako. And not simply because he was blind. Fujiki was a man whom everyone had seen for the first time that day, while countless rumors had been circulating about Irako for at least half a year, about his stay at the residence of that fiefdom's martial arts instructor, Okakura Bokusai, and his mysterious sword technique, called *Mumyo sakanagare* ("inverse flow of unawareness"). This secret technique had only been witnessed by a few of Tadanaga's subordinates, but it was said to be of exquisite skill impossible to describe by words. It was also said that, above all, what surprised people was the original stance he took.

Irako and Fujiki bowed respectfully and when they drew their swords, as expected, the spectators shouted in unison. The shock was due to the fact that, compared to Fujiki's Gennosuke initial position with his sword drawn high above his head, Irako Seigen, with his blind eyes fixed on his rival, had nailed the drawn sword to the ground, in the space between the toes of his right foot, like a cane, and remained motionless. It was a grotesque stance that had never been seen or heard in any school of martial arts before.

II

Iwamoto Kogan, Irako and Fujiki's teacher, was an expert unparalleled in the art of swordsmanship, known throughout the region of Nobi⁶ from the end of the Keicho era (1596-1615) to

the beginning of the Kan'ei era. The story says that at first he really looked a savage from the mountains when he appeared near the Nagoya Castle, with his hair tangled and his face dirty, carrying in one hand a seventy-centimetre wooden stick with which he confronted and crushed all the *dojo* without much effort, which left everyone amazed. However, it seems that this is nothing more than a legend mixed with traces of the history of the great swordsman Toda Seigen, who defeated Umezu, in the Eiroku era (1558-1570), with a wooden stick.

In any case, his superb swordsmanship was widely known, and in his maturity he had more than a thousand disciples. However, among his many disciples, there were quite a few who, despite the poor prospects for the future, were attracted to learning *kendo* by the innocent beauty, like of a rose that is beginning to bloom, of Kogan's only daughter, Mie.

Nevertheless, it was obvious to anyone that Mie's future husband would be either Irako Seigen or Fujiki Gennosuke. Among Iwamoto's disciples there were three who were known as "the tiger and the two dragons": assistant instructor Ushimata Gonzaemon, Irako and Fujiki. But Ushimata was in his thirties, had been married, and was a large, hideous-looking man. By contrast, both Irako and Fujiki were in their twenties and single. They were equal in physical strength, but when it came to sword technique, each had his own particular style: Irako was fast and agile, while Fujiki was strict and powerful. If he had to, Kogan would've preferred Fujiki's technique by far, but instead his daughter Mie seemed to be enthralled by Irako's peculiarly devilish beauty, and not by Fujiki's elegant features.

—Fujiki is more direct with the sword, but since Mie seems to have a crush on Irako, we will have to choose him — said Kogan to his concubine Iku as he sipped a small glass of sake.

Kogan, although he was approaching fifty, having been graced with a strong constitution and unparalleled vitality, had several concubines since his wife's death, but he seemed to have a special preference for the last one he had procured — Iku, the daughter of a Matsuzaka merchant, so he had placed her in his home from the beginning to take care of her at any time.

—But, if it comes to choosing a successor, obviously I think it would be

⁶ Great plain where the city of Nagoya is located.

better if one had earned my husband's favor, — argued Iku, — Besides, no matter how good-looking they say he is, there is something weird and scary about Irako, capable of filling a young woman's heart with restlessness, whereas Fujiki gives the impression of being docile and trustworthy, or so it seems to me.

—Yes, I think so too, but my young daughter prefers Irako. I'd say it's because there's something in his eyes that makes him strangely seductive. Sometimes it even happens to me, as a man, that when this guy looks at me, I get a funny feeling. Apparently he is very popular not only among all the girls and women of the clan, but also with all those in the village surrounding the castle. They say that when he looks at them, they feel like their bones are melting. Ha ha ha! Gonza told me about it the other day, and it seemed to make him a little envious. Do you get that impression, too?

—Well, I'm not at such a fickle age as to let myself be taken in by the looks of gentlemen. On the other hand, what the disciples always say is that when they are struck by my husband's gaze, they become immobile.

—It is that, as my name indicates, my eyes are those of a tiger, or an ogre⁷. When I look at someone, they get scared and freeze, but in Irako's case people are captivated and feel like they're going to lose their senses.

—Well, I think, in that case, he's even less desirable as a suitor for Mie...

—Ha-ha-ha. You're weird. You just were going to support Irako, now you're totally against him.

—Come on, none of that! — he rushed to deny Iku. Then he filled the little cup with sake again, with his fingers slightly shaking.

Kogan watched Iku's white fingers closely, but suddenly a sharp gleam appeared in his eyes. His gaze shifted from the sensual nape of Iku's neck to her shoulders and hips, but all of a sudden, as if he had just discovered something new, his eyes glowed for a moment and then an ominous smile formed on his lips.

A few days later, Kogan, accompanied by a number of his disciples, left for the Shinto shrine at Sengen. Iku was in a separate room of the house arranging Kogan's clothes, when a man sneaked into the room.

—Oh, Irako, — whispered Iku quietly, restraining herself, but both her eyes and cheeks brimmed with a joy impossible to conceal as she stared at the man's face.

—I couldn't find a better time...

Seigen quickly approached and sat down so that his knees touched Iku's,

⁷ Kogan is written with the characters tiger' and eye(s)'. By changing the first character to 'ogre' you get Kigan (ogre eyes).

placed his hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes. He knew only too well the bewitching charm of his own pupils. Iku, as if struck down by those eyes, closed hers and raised her head. Then Seigen embraced her neck with his hands and drew her face toward his. After a while they separated their bodies, which were entangled in one another.

—Irako, it seems that soon my husband will choose you as the husband of his daughter Mie, — Iku pronounced as she tucked her skirt in tightly, her cheeks rosy and her voice a mixture of rancor, sadness and jealousy.

Seigen had that expectation as well. Naturally, he craved as much for Mie — who, while still only a bud to blossom, was already known as "the most beautiful of Nobi" — as he was for the status that he would confer on her as the master's successor if he married her. However, he couldn't go a single day without the smell of womanhood that had enveloped him almost from the first moment in his life he could remember. He knew that his relationship with his master's wife was bad, but the burning, pure passion that this mature woman showed him in an unexpected way dragged him into this situation.

—Seigen, what do you plan to do?

—Mmm, at the moment we have no choice but to accept.

—I hate it. I hate that you have a lover, I hate that another woman takes you away from me.

—And you say it, the master's beloved? If word got out about us, the master would probably kill me.

—What do you mean, kill you? Instead, kill him and it's over. After all, my husband is old and you are young, — Iku shouted vehemently.

—No, that's impossible. I'm not capable of killing him. Not me, not anyone. There is no one in the world who can stand up to the master's *nagareboshi* ('shooting star').

Kogan's *nagareboshi* technique was a fearsome, swift sword strike that inflicted the certain death of the rival. It consisted of aiming at the opponent's neck and, emulating the movement of a shooting star, cutting horizontally. Precisely because he knew how to handle the sword, Seigen was quick to reject Iku's bold proposal.

—Well then... take me with you and let's run away.

Iku embraced Seigen with a desperate look. In that moment, he felt a threatening presence on the other side of the sliding door. He broke away instantly and jumped out into the corridor overlooking the garden.

—Who's there? — he shouted.

He looked around, his heart stopped pounding and a cold sweat ran down his back. Between the thick trees of the garden shone a pair of eyes that

burned with rage and glowed like wildfire. The next day, Kogan had Mie and Iku join him and summoned Ushimata, Irako and Fujiki.

—Lately, the situation in the *dojo* has been nothing more than a matter of weakness. The impetus is weakening of the three of you who are the leaders; so, after a long time, you are going to make an effort and fight a duel in my presence.

Kogan's voice was unusually severe. If that had been the only objective, it would have been more logical for the duel to take place in the *dojo*, in front of all the disciples. But it was clear that there was some ulterior motive for summoning only the three of them into the garden of the separate room in the main house.

Ushimata Gonzaemon had a feeling that this was a preamble to initiation into the mystery of the *nagareboshi* technique. Fujiki Gennosuke concluded that it was a matter of choosing a husband for Mie. And, for his part, Irako Seigen sensed in the master's eyes, full of hatred and directed especially toward him, a cruel stratagem of revenge, although he was unable to guess its exact scheme.

By Kogan's order, Ushimata and Irako would duel. Ushimata's specialty was his *hien kirikaeshi*, or "swallow flight counterattack," which he developed.

It consisted of waiting for the opponent to lose his balance during the exchange of blows in the fight and then rushing at the opponent, acting so quickly that one wondered where such speed was hidden in that enormous bull's⁸ body, and pushing the opponent with his whole body until he was bent. Then, taking advantage of the flexibility provided by the desperate attempts by the rival to resist, Ushimata jumped back and just at that moment with his huge sword he smashed his opponent's right hand. No one else apart of Master Kogan had been able to defend himself from this supernatural counterattack.

Irako was easily defeated. He was intimidated by the abnormal glow of Kogan's piercing gaze, which disturbed and inhibited him. This caused him to lose his usual agility and speed. In contrast, Gonzaemon's simplicity, his mind free of all thoughts, did not have to exert much effort to strike Irako's right forearm with a blow so hard that it hurt like a real slash.

—That looks bad, Irako! What a shame! — Kogan scolded him, and as he bowed and withdrew, he continued, — Wait, Irako. Now fight Fujiki.

Kogan signaled to Ushimata, who had won the duel and was waiting to face Fujiki, to withdraw and then pointed to Gennosuke.

⁸ Ushimata's surname begins with the character *bull* (*ushi*).

Irako still had a sore, half-numb right arm where Gonzaemon struck him. Irako was hesitant, but the glint in Kogan's eye was increasingly aggressive and wild, and Irako resigned himself to his fate.

In terms of technique, Gennosuke was orthodox and although he faithfully devoted himself to learning both the *nagareboshi* of the master and the counterattack of his more experienced companion Ushimata, he had obviously not yet reached their level. But that was only in comparison to Kogan and Ushimata; of course, in comparison to an ordinary rival, he was a fearsome virtuoso. Besides, the fact that Mie was witnessing everything made him very concentrated.

As soon as he got up, he lunged nimbly at Irako's chest, backed away quickly, and as soon as he saw an opportunity to counterattack on the forearm, without losing a moment, he brandished his sword and delivered a lightning strike to him horizontally. Seigen had any movement in his right arm and was now receiving a blow in the same forearm again; his blade received a side blow right in the middle and flew nearly six feet to the left.

—Amateur! Since you barely train and only get to leer at the girls, that's how it goes. Irako, I'm going to fix that corrupt spirit of yours with a few strokes. Get a sword. Idiot! A real sword! — Kogan screamed his violent curses.

—What?! — when they heard "real sword", both Mie and Iku became pale.

—But master... — Ushimata and Fujiki were also surprised and tried to dissuade him, but Kogan silenced them with a roar.

—Silence! If I don't fix this rookie with the sword, he'll never come to his senses. Ha, ha, ha. You don't have to worry. With that loose arm, Irako can't even scratch me. Although it won't take much to beat him up... Ha, ha, ha! Are you afraid? I won't take your life, I promise. I'll only spare your life, only your life, okay?

Although he had already surrendered, Irako was still stunned by the exaggerated sequence of events. Then there was the sound of Iku shouting frantically in a choppy voice from a corridor overlooking the garden.

—Irako, confront him and kill him. Kill him! If you don't kill him, he will kill you!

Seigen drew his sword like a sleepwalker. The moment he felt the eyes of Kogan the ogre before him, who pounced upon him like a massive beast, the fiery silvery edge of the blade sliced through his eyes, leaving a horizontal line in the middle of his face.

Seigen gave a scream and fell to the ground on his back. Kogan's *nagareboshi* had torn his eyes out.

III

Three years later, the successor to the Iwamoto family had not yet been chosen, because when Kogan announced Fujiki Gennosuke as Mie's future husband again, she rejected him. The seventeen-year old girl, who watched the events of that day from beginning to end without blinking an eye or saying a word, despite the paleness of her face and the tremors that ran through her body, unexpectedly made her intentions clear.

—I already decided in my heart that my husband would be Irako. I regret that he has left me for another woman, but while he lives I will not accept another for a husband. So, whoever he is, I will marry the one who does me the favor of killing Irako.

The other woman she referred to was Iku, the woman who ran barefoot toward Seigen when he fainted after his eyes had been slashed, hugged him in tears, and then turned to Kogan and dared to call him a brute while beating him. When Irako was taken away, she accompanied him and left the mansion not to return.

No matter how much they fought her or tried to appease her, Mie stubbornly refused to listen and others didn't know what to do with her, until finally it was decided to investigate what had become of Irako Seigen, and it was discovered that a few days after that event he had gone off somewhere, eyes covered by a white cloth, by Iku's hand.

That way, without knowing his whereabouts, the Iwamoto *dojo* days went by in a dark atmosphere, ominous and oppressive.

Three years later, on a summer evening, when every external disciple had already withdrawn and had already finished sweeping the garden, unexpectedly, in the humidified hall of the Iwamoto *dojo* a couple formed by a man and a woman appeared.

—It's Irako! — shouted one of the two or three disciples, his silhouette invisible in the shadows.

In his beautiful, fine, pale face, with deep features chiselled, dark nerves were marked and the eyes were tightly closed. His companion, Iku, was also visibly thinner than at the time when Iku lived in the mansion, but still her unusual beauty seemed to have increased. Seigen went to the astonished disciples and spoke to them in a cold, muffled voice.

—Irako Seigen wants to duel the owner of this *dojo*, Iwamoto Kogan. Get the message to him.

As soon as Kogan, who was preparing to sit at the small table to begin dinner with his new concubine, heard Irako being mentioned, he rose immediately, but then changed his mind and broadly smiled.

—Tell Irako that Kogan does not fight novices, but that if he is determined, he can return tomorrow and face either Gonzaemon or Fujiki. Hearing Kogan's response, Seigen slipped away a scornful laugh; as if he had undergone a transformation, took on a fierce appearance and screamed in such a way that it could be heard at the deepest end of the *dojo*.

—Irako is no longer a disciple of Kogan. As a skilled swordsman who wanders the world, I challenge him to a duel with real swords. Have you chickened out, Kogan? Shame on you!

Kogan grabbed his favourite *katana* and ran out into the corridor outside.

—Come into the garden so I can tear you apart!

Seeing Seigen's smirk and Iku to give him a penetrating look of hate, Kogan was furious and boiling with rage. He went down to the garden and pulled the sword out of its sheath.

—Irako, I won't spare even your life today. En garde! — declared Kogan. Just then he felt a chill and began to doubt his own eyes, for Seigen had already taken his stand. As soon as he saw it, that pose with the sword stuck firmly in the ground and the blade facing the opponent reminded him of a blind man leaning on his cane, but it was actually a stance that looked totally impenetrable, loaded with a threat.

Kogan, who thought he knew all the techniques Seigen have mastered.

"And that's precisely why I had been despising him from the start." He was baffled — and he had to swallow his saliva in the face of such a mysterious, fearsome posture that emanated bloodlust.

The two remained facing each other during what seemed like a long time. Or maybe, it was just an extremely brief moment.

To blind Seigen, once fearsome ogre eyes of Kogan no longer contained any spells. He simply emptied his mind with total indifference and waited for his chance. "It is clear that he is no longer the Seigen of old. And my *nagareboshi* is the last resort..." Kogan thought about the first formidable opponent that had found him in all his life. This was the first time Kogan was going to use for his *nagareboshi* the second time before the same opponent with a real sword. So far he had defeated all his opponents with a single *nagareboshi* strike.

"I should have killed him outright when I had, uh, the chance."

Kogan deeply regretted doing a cruel revenge, shattering those eyes that carried an incomparable fascination, rather than killing him. But he couldn't put it off any longer. The darkness of the night was approaching,

which would be no problem for blind Seigen, but would instead be a considerable disadvantage for Kogan, who was already approaching old age.

He applied his secret *nagareboshi* technique, which had been unbeatable thus far, but when his blade moved toward Seigen's neck with the intention of slitting his throat with a side cut, Seigen's blade, which was stuck in the ground, flashed like a white spark, rose vertically in a bow and brought down Kogan, who was left lying on his back. An impressive cut ran across his face vertically from his chin to his crown.

—Prepare to die! — shouted Mie, and ran to Seigen, but Seigen knocked her down with the sheath of his sword and her dagger flew out of her hands.

—Are you Mie? I'm sure you're even more beautiful now, too bad these eyes can't see you. But you alone will not achieve anything. Tell Ushimata or Fujiki that if they want defeat the master's enemy, then let them come and get me. I'll stay behind Rakuei Temple for a while.

The terrifying face of Seigen directed toward Mie shone sinisterly with satisfaction at having materialized the rancor accumulated over three years, and in the midst of darkness of the night it was so beautiful and seductive that it didn't seem of this world; it gave the impression that it shone like a mirage.

IV

Irako glanced sidelong at the trembling disciples, who dared not attack him, and left the *dojo* being led by Iku.

—Congratulations, darling. — tears were streaming down Iku's cheeks.

—Well, I have made you suffer as well, — Seigen replied as he clenched Iku's hand, still shaking from the excitement.

Having lost his eyesight, Seigen had already abandoned any illusions about mastering the way of the blade, but it was the tenacity of this woman that encouraged him to continue. In the Kogan *dojo*, Iku had discovered, without realizing it, the inherent intensity of the sword and had fathomed it deeply. Her cunning intuition that, once blind, the only thing that could keep her beloved's vitality going was the sword proved correct.

More than the thought of revenge for the cruel master's punishment, what clung to Seigen's soul like a devil in a nightmare was the determination to try and defeat the *nagareboshi* he had hitherto considered invincible even if it cost him his life.

Now that he was blind, he no longer felt the same passion for women as before. He devoted himself diligently to improving his sword techniques. Under the light of the sun countless bright sparks frolicked, and in the darkness of the night a thick black mist covered everything, but neither the shapes of the world nor the silhouettes of people were visible. Seigen polished his technique by challenging this greyish universe with his sword, convinced of its infallibility.

To counter the horizontal cut of the *nagareboshi*, the secret technique that Seigen devised was a cut that he was totally convinced would grant him absolute victory: *Sakanagare* ("inverse flow").

To counter the horizontal cut of the *nagareboshi*, the secret technique devised by Seigen was a cut from the bottom to the top: *Sakanagare* ("inverse flow"). This fast sword strike, which took advantage of the impulse of the *katana* blade stuck in the ground to make a vertical cut, had even more potential to kill the opponent than the horizontal cut of the *nagareboshi*.

But the problem was in being able to reach the body of the opponent with that fleeting flash of the sword. How could a blind man achieve this?

Seigen ordered Iku to throw all sorts of objects at him and practiced his *sakanagare* technique relentlessly. Eventually he mastered it and, just as the object, whatever it was, entered the path of the sword, he cut it with a vertical movement from below. At first, Iku would throw clothes, pillows, bowls, go pieces, hairpins... and Seigen would cut them in two right in the middle as soon as he entered a field of about one hundred and twenty centimeters in front of him, even the bean seeds that Iku would later throw at him and that would make a lot of noise as they flew.

And then one day, when Seigen was resting, satisfied after having knocked down everything Iku had thrown at him, suddenly his sword rose vertically to the sky.

—Oh, did you cut something? — asked Iku, not understanding what had happened.

—I don't know what it was, but as soon as it entered *Sakanagare's* path, the sword rose unconsciously, — answered Seigen.

Iku started looking for signs on the ground and found a small mosquito lying there, its body cut right in half.

—So it was a mosquito?

Seigen held the cut remains of the tiny mosquito on his finger and smiled. The next day, they began to make preparations for the journey and headed for the vicinity of Nagoya Castle after an absence of three years.

As soon as they were informed of the violent death of Kogan, Ushimata and Fujiki ran to the place and, seeing with their own eyes the corpse of the master with the torn face, and after learning from Mie about the inexplicable handling of Seigen's sword, both looked into each other's eyes and had an indescribable and frightening feeling.

Both decided simultaneously within themselves, as if they had agreed, that they had to kill Irako. Whatever diabolical technique he had learned, it seemed impossible to them that he could directly defeat the master's *nagareboshi*. All they could conceive of was that it was an accidental defeat.

Knowing the Seigen's skill from three years ago, it seemed to them that if they both put their all into combat he could not defeat them easily; they had to defeat this mysterious technique for the honor of the Iwamoto *dojo*. Immediately, both swore to retaliate for the death of the master. There were other disciples who proposed to attack Seigen among all, but the two of them firmly dissuaded them.

—It cannot be. To attack one rival with several people would be a disgrace to the disciples of Kogan. Moreover, it is the two of us who have been designated by the rival.

So, the next morning, both of them went to the back of Rakuei temple in search of Seigen.

—Did you come? — Seigen introduced himself to them with a slight smile. He silently prepared, went down to the garden and drew his sword. In the corridor overlooking the garden was Iku, totally changed from the day before, with a face that showed only a mocking smile, as if she were totally convinced of the victory of her beloved.

"Fujiki, come here. I will set things straight, starting with you."

Seigen turned the edge of his sword towards his rival and plunged it vertically into the ground. On the basis of Mie's story, Gennosuke had spent the previous night planning strategies, but confronted with this peculiar stance personally, he felt a sense of dread when he realized that, as he was expecting, it would be very hard to beat. Nevertheless, he promptly took the original stance that was one of his strengths, with his sword pointed at his opponent's eyes, and resolved then to put into practice, as he had thought, the secret technique he had been devising in private for years: *hien yokonagare*, or "horizontal cutting of the flying monkey". He was sure that this would be the only technique that could anticipate the vertical cut of the Seigen's sword that Mie had described to him.

He started from the basis of the master's *nagareboshi*, but he had made it even better: one pounced on the opponent as if he were going to hit his left shoulder with his whole body, and mowed him down with a horizontal cut. Assuming that by the time the blade appeared to be moving, the entire body had already flown diagonally to the right, then Seigen's reverse upward cut should not rip more than the air.

Unfortunately, however, he had not taken sufficient account of the *sakanagare*'s fearsome speed. When Gennosuke's body moved diagonally, and it looked as if the side cut was going to reach Seigen's torso, Gennosuke's left arm flew off, severed at the base, and Gennosuke was left standing with his blade up, turned around, and fell to the ground.

Despite that he was about to lose consciousness due to the pain of the mutilated arm, Gennosuke witnessed the duel between Ushimata Gonzaemon, who had taken his place, and Irako Seigen to the end. His profound desire as a martial arts expert to see with his own eyes the true essence of Irako's sword technique, who ultimately had failed to fully elude his *hien yokonagare*, made his body, on the verge of collapse, able to bear the pain.

The fight between Gonzaemon and Seigen was equally overwhelming. Surely both fought with the awareness that this was a critical moment without any precedent in their lives.

As he watched the battle between Gennosuke and Seigen, an idea had flashed through Gonzaemon's mind. He glanced around quickly in all directions and, when he moved about twenty or thirty feet to the south, called out to his opponent with a shout.

—Irako, come! — Following Ushimata's voice, Seigen approached, sword drawn in his hand, to where he stood. As soon as he saw that the expression on Irako's face showed signs of confusion, without wasting any time, Gonzaemon yelled at him again:

—Begin!

Seigen instantly stopped and thrust the sword into the ground.

—Oh! — Iku let out a short scream from the corridor.

The sword sank easily into the soft earth. Right in that instant, Gonzaemon threw himself on Seigen's chest, with a force akin to that of a hit from a huge rock. With no resistance from the soft earth in which the sword rested, Seigen's *sakanagare* managed only to slightly tear Gonzaemon's clothing at the height of his chest and injure the tip of his chin.

Seigen's sword, placed back in position, and Gonzaemon's sword, firmly pressed against the former, were locked at hand-guard level, a position that

was undoubtedly more suited to Gonzaemon and his particular counter-attacking technique.

Both Gennosuke, who began to lose consciousness, and Iku, who became pale, sensed that Gonzaemon was going to kill Seigen. Just as it seemed that Gonzaemon would take a step backwards, though, Irako stepped forward and suddenly jumped to the right.

Once the opportunity for counterattack was lost, the two fighters returned to their initial positions, facing each other. But Gonzaemon was bleeding from his injured chin... and Seigen was bleeding from the instep of his right foot. No one had noticed the blood that flowed from Seigen's foot, but it was precisely that wound that decided the fight's outcome.

Assuming the original stance again, instead of sinking the sword back into the earth, Seigen moved his right foot forward and plunged the tip of his *katana* into his foot. Victory was decided at that very moment.

When Gonzaemon began to move to try to rush on Seigen a second time, Seigen's *sakanagare* rose vertically: he tore the previous wound again and continued on his way up, penetrating deeply in a straight line, until he reached just above the ridge of the nose.

But before that, the sword had torn the flesh of Seigen's right foot instep to the bone.

V

The body of Ushimata Gonzaemon, with his face cut in the same way as Kogan's body, and Fujiki Gennosuke, caught between life and death after losing his left arm, were taken to the Iwamoto *dojo*, where a deep silence settled in.

This time no one proposed to go out to avenge them but, on the contrary, everyone was afraid that perhaps Irako Seigen, with his pale face and thin figure, could strike back at any moment with his mysterious sword.

Everyone was relieved the instant they heard that Seigen had left saying he was going to Sunpu, holding Iku's hand and dragging his right foot, and had left the vicinity of the castle. They then began preparations for the funerals of their teacher and assistant instructor.

After losing his leaders in one fell swoop, the Iwamoto *dojo* fell rapidly into decline and was disbanded quickly. Only Fujiki Gennosuke remained in the vast mansion, who could finally get up on his feet; Mie, who seemed to harbor a deep determination; and a few servants who had already been working there for many years.

Mie begged Gennosuke again and again to tell her about the fight, and each time he did so, with a lost look wandering from one place to another in the empty house and a voice like a possessed one she spoke:

—That despicable Irako. How could he have thought of that magnificent and sinister technique? I hate it. It's disgusting. Please, Gennosuke, kill that man. He is my father's enemy, Ushimata's enemy, yours and mine.

—No, that guy's extremely talented, I'm no match for him.

—Why are you talking as if you're afraid of him? He's lost his sight in both eyes. You've only lost one arm. Please defeat him. I'm sure you can beat him.

By imagining the deserted interior of the mansion they lived in, people assumed that Gennosuke and Mie had become husband and wife. And besides, they behaved in public as if they were. But the truth was that they hadn't married yet.

After losing his self-confidence regarding the mastery of the sword, Gennosuke became shy and sought comfort in the beauty of Mie, whom he asked and begged to become his wife. But Mie outright refused.

—Kill Irako, that detestable Irako. If you kill him, that very night I will become your wife. — Mie's answer was always the same.

This dialogue was repeated over and over again until Gennosuke gradually developed a tangle of dark, unresolvable doubts in his soul.

"Could it be that Mie, impossible as it may seem, loves Seigen deeply?"

That was the impression he was getting. When Mie said that she hated him, it was hard to believe that she was referring only to the bitter hatred against her father's enemy and the man who had betrayed her, but she also seemed to be filled with a severe grudge and a deep sadness that made her squirm. It all sounded more like an agonizing cry that she gave in an attempt to stifle the loving feeling that was eating away at her flesh with deliberately inflamed hatred.

—If you don't stand up to him, I will. In any case, even if I am no match for him, I will strike him with my sword and he will strike me down. — As Mie reached the point of proposing such a thing, as was to be expected, Gennosuke was again aroused by a slight fighting spirit that encouraged him to pick up his sword again and fight.

That night, however, he dreamt that Seigen attacked Mie with his sword and knocked her down without much effort. In the dream, Seigen immobilized Mie and she suddenly stopped pushing with her arms and legs and said in a voice that began to fade:

—Despicable Irako, I love you. I love you so much that I would even die.

After saying this between fiery gasps, she opened her kimono and her body intertwined with Seigen's. Gennosuke awoke with his entire body drenched in sweat and full of jealousy.

He had to kill Irako.

Finally, Gennosuke had made his decision. He knew that that fearsome blade had sunk deep within him. Still, he had to kill him; he certainly had to kill him.

To achieve this, the first thing he had to do was come up with a strategy to be able to avoid the first blow of Seigen's *sakanagare* technique. And it didn't matter if he was injured on the chin like Ushimata in the attempt. Secondly, if he managed to throw himself on Seigen's chest, he had to attack him without giving him a chance to turn his body. Since even Ushimata Gonzaemon had failed, it seemed obvious that a counterattack would not be effective. A method had to be developed that would make feasible the almost impossible task of knocking down the opponent while keeping his body close to the enemy.

Gennosuke devoted himself day and night to strategizing to defeat the *sakanagare*. Not even in his sleep, while he was sleeping, the sword of Seigen stuck in the ground was going out of his head, or the silhouette of him when he stood upright and shone mysteriously.

And so two years passed by, until one early summer night Mie told him: —Just one month from now it's the second anniversary of my father's death. You still haven't decided to kill Irako? — Mie spoke as she cut with a knife a large watermelon she ordered a servant to bring.

—What a watermelon! — Gennosuke intentionally said to change the subject. — When I was a child we could seldom eat them, for they were an exotic delicacy imported from Holland, and the ones we got very occasionally were very small, not even half as big as this one. And now you can even get them here?

Suddenly, Gennosuke was silent. His eyes looked intently at Mie's hands as she cut the watermelon, as it was making a great impression on him. From the next day on, Gennosuke would lock himself away for hours and hours in the spacious *dojo* that had long since no one used; and since no one was allowed to peek, nobody knew what he was doing in there, but from every now and then, sounds would come to the outside that sounded like groans. This was not the typical attack cry used in martial arts, but it was like a short moan: "Uh!". However, as the days went by, those slight groans, even if they were low, became a strangely penetrating and intense nuisance to the people who heard them, as if they were getting up to their eyeballs.

It was the second anniversary of Kogan's death, but Gennosuke said nothing. And Mie seemed to have forgotten to encourage Gennosuke again, too. It was not that Mie had forgotten about it, however, but that lately, when she looked at Gennosuke, she felt that he was devoting his body and soul to development of a new secret technique. In these moments, swordsmen become to look like they're possessed by a demon. When that demon disappeared it would mean that he had already perfected his sword technique. Being Kogan's daughter, Mie was fully aware of this. As one might expect, she was full of anticipation, and treated Gennosuke with too much of a kindness, avoiding at all costs the subject of sword technique in conversations.

One morning, in early September of the sixth year of the Kan'ei era (1629), when she saw Gennosuke's face after leaving the *dojo*, Mie gasped and her eyes lit up. Gennosuke stood before her with a smile on his face.

—I finally figured out the strategy. Let's kill Irako.

VI

They were aware of Irako's subsequent movements after he left for Sunpu as he had announced. He was in the mansion of Okakura, the fencing master of Hasederacho, near Sunpu Castle.

Fujiki Gennosuke, accompanied by Mie, made his way to Sunpu. He carried with him a letter of introduction from the captain of the Bishu fief guard, Saida Mitsunoshin, to the advisor of Sunpu Castle, Saegusa Izunokami. The day after his arrival, he went to Saegusa's mansion, showed him the letter, explained the whole story and expressed his wish to duel with Irako.

After listening to his explanations, Saegusa doubtfully tilted his head.

—Ah, so that's what happened to Irako? I fear that his exquisite swordplay also enjoys my lord's great approval, so it is not something I can decide on my own. You'll have to wait.

Barely half a year earlier, upon his return from the long journey to Miho no Matsubara, Irako Seigen caught the attention of Tadanaga, the lord of Sunpu Castle. Something must have frightened one of the horses and the animal started rampaging, knocked the samurai riding it to the ground, slipped out of line, and ran away. It knocked down the two soldiers who tried to stop the animal and ran like an arrow down a path through a rice field.

—Watch out! Get out of the way, it's dangerous! — shouted the samurai as the horse chased the person, a blind man with a cane, who appeared in the

path of the horse. But by that time, between the runaway horse and the blind man there were left only about four or five metres. Suddenly, when everyone unconsciously stopped, imagining the worst of it, the blind man halted as well.

As soon as he saw the stick in the blind man's hand rise to the heavens, the horse reared up, turned a couple of times to either side, and finally fell and lied sideways on the ground. The samurai who approached through the path left by the horse were stunned to see the body of the animal: its face was split in half, with a reverse cut that went up from the long jaw to the space between the eyes.

The blind swordsman, who unemotionally wiped the blood from the camouflaged *katana* and returned it to its original position as a staff, was graciously invited to the castle.

By order of Tadanaga, three renowned swordsmen of the clan were chosen: Aiki Kyuzo, a student of the founder of the *Gan* style, Matsubayashi Samanosuke, Ishimura Ittetsu, the legitimate successor of Ono Shogen, of the *Kurama* school, and Izubuchi Heijiro, the legitimate son of Izubuchi Heibee, of the *Shinkage* school. The three faced the blind swordsman Irako Seigen, amidst the most absolute secrecy. In each case, Seigen nimbly lifted his wooden blade and with its tip slashed their jaws severely, sent the wooden blades of his rivals flying through the air and knocked them down with a blow to the chest.

To Tadanaga's question about which school this curious stance belonged to, Seigen answered without a single smile:

—*Mumyo sakanagare*.

After the duel with Ushimata Gonzaemon, in which he had managed to escape danger by tearing the instep of his own foot, he had devised another way to raise the blade without relying on the ground. It was to hold the blade firmly between the first and second toes of his right foot. Once Seigen inserted the tip of the blade between his toes and left it standing upright, not holding it in his hands, and then challenged a young, physically fit man to attempt to remove it. No matter how hard the young man tried, he could not get it out even a little bit, even though the portion of sword between the fingers was barely an inch.

Many members of the clan heard of Seigen's incredible technique and begged to witness it, or even asked him to instruct them in it, but Seigen laughed and never picked up the wooden sword again.

Seigen's sword technique was not something that could be taught to other people. But, despite this, they did not want such a sword expert to go to another province either. He was granted an independent stay within the

mansion of fencing master Okakura, where both Iku and he received friendly and warm treatment.

Fujiki Gennosuke was at a traveler's inn, pondering the path he should take after learning all these things through rumors, when he received a message from Saegusa to come visit him.

—I have had an occasion to tell my lord all the details of your story, — explained Saegusa, — and my lord approves of your heroic heart in avenging the death of your master. So you have been granted a magnificent setting, perfect for your revenge.

That magnificent setting was, in other words, the dueling tournament with real swords before the feudal lord. It had been the advisor of the *daimyo* Saegusa who had prepared this magnificent pairing, between a blind swordsman and a one-armed fighter willing to take revenge on him, as the first match of the day, with an eye toward a successful duel for which he would receive the thanks of his lord.

And now the stage changes and we return to the tournament grounds set up in a courtyard of Sunpu Castle, at the moment when Irako and Fujiki, facing each other, were wielding their drawn swords.

The sky was completely blue and clear, without a single cloud. Nor the wind was blowing. The square fell completely silent, not even a cough could be heard.

Seigen, as usual, planted the sword as if it were a staff and pointed the blade toward Gennosuke, then inserted the tip of the sword between his toes and stood perfectly still. For his part, Gennosuke, contrary to custom, brandished the blade above his head and stared fiercely into the space between Irako's blind eyes.

The excitement of the audience reached its peak and a desperate cry shattered the silence of the square.

—Eeeh!

Gennosuke's blade left his hand and flew into the air. It looked as if it was going to pierce Irako's crown, but Seigen set his secret *sakanagare* technique in motion and his blade flew through the air like a bolt of lightning until it split his rival's in two. Gennosuke seized the moment when the pieces of his blade fell to the ground with a loud noise and threw himself at Seigen.

In his right hand he firmly held a short sword⁹ that got locked with the long sword of Irako, who lost no time in getting back on guard. A few seconds passed and as Seigen was preparing to launch a counterattack, Gennosuke's voice echoed with a sort of gasp ("Uh!") and, to everyone's surprise, Irako's long sword fell to the ground, split from the keeper, and Gennosuke's short sword, as if it met no resistance, sliced through his opponent diagonally.

Gennosuke took a couple of steps back and stared.

The body of Seigen, who had wielded the blade until it snapped off from the warden and flew away, looked as if it were standing still as it had just been just a moment before, but right at the next moment his diagonally severed torso collapsed to the left side and fell heavily to the ground.

Gennosuke's short blade had cut Seigen in half from his right shoulder to his left side, as one would cut a watermelon, by pressing down on it until it splits in two.

Amidst the unanimous cheers of those attending, who looked as if they had just woken from a dream, there were also two faint but piercing shrieks. Iku and Mie, who had witnessed everything through the spaces between the curtains, had stabbed themselves in the chest at the same time.

⁹ *Samurai used to be armed with two swords: a long one for combat and a shorter one to defend themselves in close quarters or in small places.*

HIGYAKU NO UKEDACHI

("The sword of suffering")

I

At the time of the ox — about two in the morning — as he used to do for many years, the Shinto priest from the Ox Sanctuary, Abe Kuramaro, woke up and opened his eyes completely, as the faithful were about to arrive to perform the purifications with cold water and offer their prayers.

Kuramaro had to observe everything in secret and, after getting a general idea of possible reasons for praying, the day the faithful finished their vows he had to pronounce the most appropriate oracle.

Since the deity to whom the shrine was dedicated was Takemikazuchi (god of martial arts), most of those who came to offer prayers were warriors.

Many prayed to get into the service of a good *daimyo* and progress in life, or begged for a quick improvement of their skills of martial arts.

Sometimes people also prayed for revenge on a rival.

When they offered their last prayer in front of the shrine, the bells rang slightly inside, papers with excellent *katana* drawings fell out, and everything was done to make the strips of paper containing the omens fit their expectations. It was a place that had a great reputation for its miraculous efficiency.

—Ah, tonight is when that sinister samurai finishes his vows, — thought Kuramaro as he adjusted his *obi* and pulled a padded cotton jacket over his evening clothes. If anyone saw the Shinto priest in that quilted jacket they would not be very impressed, but the cold was unbearable. Even in this cold there are eccentrics who do cold water cleansing. "Anything for a living", he said to himself, opened the door and went out into the hallway. His whole body was shaking. The moonlight was as cold as a sharp sword's blade and pale as the columns of the sanctuary. The moonlight also shone on the back of a naked samurai who was kneeling beside the well. The samurai squeaked and squeaked the pulley and then threw the bucket of water he had just drawn over his head. Though he was used to seeing it, Kuramaro shivered all over his body and pulled his clothes closer to his chest. At that point, the warrior turned his body slightly to the right and lifted the bucket above his head with both hands.

—Oh! — obviously exclaimed Kuramaro. He said it so loudly that, had it not been for the sound of the phosphorescent splashes of water falling, after the samurai emptied the bucket over his head, the warrior would surely have heard his exclamation.

During those twenty-one days he had seen the warrior's back every night, but that was the first time he had ever seen it from the front. And on that body numerous sword scars stood out from the front. Starting from the face, and going down to the shoulders, the chest, both arms, the abdomen, even from the thighs to the shins, was covered with dire scars, as if it were the mischief of a child who had taken a brush and marked it all over.

They did not look like injuries received in a normal battle or in any duel. For a few moments, Kuramaro was absorbed in observing the naked body of that dreadful warrior as he crouched, stretched, and knelt again.

Kuramaro nodded, for now he was beginning to understand that it was because of these scars that the samurai always did his best to avoid showing his face. When he visited the sanctuary he always wore a black cloth to cover it extensively, and when he went to pray in front of the shrine he would bend his head so low that he even touched his forehead on the floorboards.

But still, what was that man asking for in his prayers?

Usually, the devotees whispered in front of the shrine the object of their request. By means of a mechanism on the wooden floor, almost everything reached the ears of Kuramaro, who hid in an enclosure at the bottom. And in the cases where that did not happen, as after they prayed they did things like waving the sword in front of the sanctuary, one could more or less intuit the content of their prayers. But that man remained taciturn from beginning to end, kneeling on the stairs of the shrine and then leaving in silence, so until that very day, which was the day he finished his prayers, it had been impossible for him to get an idea.

Would he ask to have his scars healed, or would he perhaps ask to never have to suffer such wounds again?

In that instant, something suddenly occurred to Kuramaro.

—That's right! How could I not have realized it until now?

Kuramaro hurried to the shrine and tried to open the donation box, which would only be opened at the end of the month.

Indeed, inside he found a sealed white envelope. Sometimes people who did not know the official protocol for offering Shinto prayers, or those who were ashamed of the content of their prayers, acted this way, putting them in the box for the offerings.

Kuramaro took the sealed letter, ran to the deity's altar and sat under the

lamp. No doubt the warrior would finish his ablutions at any moment and come to perform his final prayer. By then he should have read the prayer and thought of a suitable oracle.

When he broke the seal he could see that the prayer was long and written in Chinese characters on top quality paper. Both the writing and the calligraphy were splendid, but as Kuramaro progressed in his reading, his breathing began to falter and his vision became blurred with amazement. The content was, broadly speaking, as follows:

"I, Zanami Kanzaemon, resident of the Abe district in this same province, aged thirty-two, due to a strange vice that is difficult for me to confess to others, have long suffered a deep shame and, despite my efforts to heal myself, to this moment, found nothing to be effective. I pray that by the will of the god of the martial arts I may be granted the power to rid myself of this shameful inclination."

"First of all, this strange mania began to appear when I was only nine years old, and for unknown reason, if a man or woman with a beautiful face inflicts a wound on my body, I feel a sensation of boundless pleasure that makes me feel almost as if I was frolicking in the heavens."

"So far I have fought dozens of times wielding a steel sword and although I have not yet been defeated even once, I have reached a point where, if my opponent is a handsome man or a beautiful woman, I am not satisfied if, before defeating them, I do not deliberately allow them to wound me with their swords several times and each time they do so I feel an exquisite pleasure."

"Besides, in the last few years I've found out that if I let them hurt me and finally kill those rivals with my sword, then I enter a state of mind of indescribable supreme happiness."

"I find it really embarrassing, effeminate, pitiful and utterly despicable. I wouldn't mind losing an arm or a leg in return, I just pray that I'm granted a cure for this detestable deviation."

When he had finished reading the strange prayer, Kuramaro was so extremely confused that he had completely forgotten about the cold in his legs, which were already almost frozen, and remained seated. In his long life as a Shinto priest he had never seen or heard such a strange prayer. But what kind of oracle should he write to him?

While Kuramaro hesitated about what he should do, completely oblivious to the passage of time, the warrior, who had already finished his ablutions and had dressed, crouched in the prayer room and after a while rose.

—In the end I could not get any kind of oracle. It seems that even the god of this sanctuary has abandoned me, and he always make sure that he always has some. — he whispered, covered himself with the black cloth, and left the compound. In the moonlight, his silhouette seen from behind seemed disconsolate and grief-stricken, and so thin that it could freeze.

II

Zanami Kanzaemon first became aware of his strange vice, as he wrote in the prayer, at the age of nine. Kanzaemon lost his parents at an early age and was adopted by his uncle Isoda Gunbee and his wife, who loved him as if he was their own son. It seemed that his relatives intended to marry him off in the future to their daughter Kinu and make him the heir to the family.

At such a tender age, the young Kanzaemon held his beautiful young aunt Nahome in great esteem and admiration. Once, when Nahome stood in front of the mirror and began putting on makeup after taking a bath, Kanzaemon sat down next to her and felt a pleasure not at all like that of a child as he watched in fascination as his aunt's smooth skin took on a pinkish hue.

—Auntie, your hands are as soft as silk, — he said as he held Nahome's arms between his fingers. Sometimes just holding her was unsatisfactory and he would pinch her.

—Kanza, that is bad.

When his aunt gave him a soft angry look and rebuked him, Kanzaemon blushed, but he pinched her even harder on the soft inside of her arm.

—Ah! You're hurting me. — Nahome got quite angry and jabbed Kanzaemon in the back of his little hand with the sharp end of the comb she was holding. — When you do something bad I will do that to you, and it will hurt.

—It didn't hurt.

—And now? — Nahome jokingly pressed a little harder and the boy's thin skin tore and began to bleed. — I'm sorry, Kanza. Did I hurt you? Forgive me, I didn't mean to...

Nahome hurried to wipe away the blood, but when he saw Kanzaemon's face, she drew back in surprise. The boy had his eyes open like plates and smiled in ecstasy. And in his eyes floated a strange lust that stunned Nahome.

When his precious aunt's hand picked up the comb and plunged it into the back of his hand, Kanzaemon felt a pleasant sensation, as if a wave of joy

ran through his entire body. At that time he was not yet fully aware of it, but it was a feeling of carnal euphoria throughout his body resembling the peak moment of that vice in which he was secretly immersed.

It was impossible for Kanzaemon to forget the feeling of that moment of delight. After that, he often played pranks deliberately in order to receive his aunt's punishment, but Nahome had made it a point never to inflict another wound on Kanzaemon's body. Something told her, instinctively, that she should do no such thing to that child.

Nahome found, however, that Kanzaemon's legs and arms were often suspiciously cut.

—Kanza, how did you get that wound? — she'd ask him, and the boy would always try to make excuses like he had fallen or bumped into something, but it was obvious that it wasn't that kind of injury.

When one day, by chance, Nahome discovered the secret of Kanzaemon, she had to suppress a scream of terror in his throat. Kanzaemon was lying face down, naked to the waist. Straddling his back sat her daughter Kinu, who had just turned five, cutting into Kanzaemon's skin with a knife.

—Brother, does it hurt yet?

—No, it doesn't hurt. Harder, cut me harder.

—Oh, there's blood coming out.

—It doesn't matter. More, cut me more.

Nahome was horrified by the strange conversation they were having. She spoke to her husband Gunbee, called the two children and reprimanded them severely.

Of course, Kinu simply acted on her cousin's instructions. What his relatives failed to understand, however, was why Kanzaemon, of his own free will, sought to hurt himself and feel suffering. In any case, they gave him a good scolding and forbade him to meet with Kinu again in any case. Shortly after that, Kanzaemon's strange vice appeared to have been cured, but on a visit to the hot springs in the summer it became completely clear that this had not been the case. Kanzaemon had been robbed of his companion at home, but he in turn had made a beautiful boy he used to play with take on that role. Kanzaemon's body was once again filled with bruises and scars.

His uncle was furious and spanked him. Kanzaemon experienced intense pain from this, even though he felt nothing but pleasure when his aunt or the beautiful boy hurt or beat him. The boy swore that he would suppress himself with all his strength and never do it again.

However, when he was thirteen years old he began to attend the neighbourhood *dojo* to learn how to handle the sword, and again the vice reappeared with inexorable intensity.

In those days bamboo swords were not yet used in training and instead they've mostly sparred with wooden swords, so there always were injured in the duels that were held every now and then. And Kanzaemon was always the first on the list of wounded.

Kanzaemon handled his sword especially well, improved quickly and outperformed his fellow disciples; but when it came to practice, when faced with a particular opponent, it seemed as if he had become someone else and thus became careless, letting himself to be hit by his opponent's wooden sword and taking strikes all over his body.

That particular opponent was a beautiful young man. Despite having brilliant swordsmanship that could put any opponent on the ropes, every time Kanzaemon challenged the attractive young man he was easily hurt and received hard blows to the shoulders or arms.

—What a strange guy, — commented his own classmates when they noticed.

There were also those who said that he was looking for homosexual relations and that was why he was being bullied. However, Kanzaemon had no inclination toward homosexuality whatsoever, in the usual sense of the word. He simply derived unsurpassed pleasure from being beaten or injured at will by beautiful boys with womanly looks.

And it wasn't enough for him to have it with random pretty boys; they all followed the same pattern. One only had to look around to see that they all shared similar features to his aunt Nahome.

Apparently, when Kanzaemon was beaten and injured by his rivals, it was his aunt's face that came to mind. In those days, when he returned home he would look at his aunt with burning, wet eyes.

The lustful look that Kanzaemon sometimes showed, who was no longer young enough to be considered a child, along with the gossip that came from the outside, made his parents feel uncomfortable and they decided to leave Kanzaemon in the custody of other relatives. When his uncle told him, he bowed his head, rose silently and that very night left the house with his clothes on.

He wandered into the western regions and at the age of seventeen entered the service of the Todo clan as an infantryman. That year the winter campaign took place in Osaka, and the following year came the summer

campaign¹⁰. During the winter, the troops of Todo were placed in the vanguard, but in the area of Sumiyoshi and Abeno there was only a small skirmish with the garrison of the castle that went to invade Sakai, so it seemed to him that there was no opportunity to fight a real battle. Even so, Kanzaemon managed to take the head (including the helmet) of a high-ranking soldier from the castle garrison and was chosen as the head of the foot-soldier squad.

In the summer campaign, being an advance party at the entrance to Kawachi, the troops of Todo met the troops of the famous Chosokabe Morichika head-on and on the dyke of the Nagase River they were severely defeated in a fierce struggle. Had the troops of Li Naotaka not come to their aid, the situation might have been more uncertain.

Kanzaemon fought fearlessly, his entire body splattered with blood, and killed several enemy soldiers. On the road leading from Yao to Kyuhooji, they caught up with Chosokabe's troops as they retreated and ravaged them left and right. Then, however, a young man planted his face against Kanzaemon and approached him with a sword. As he saw the young warrior's face, Kanzaemon felt a singular shock run through his entire body.

The sun that shone during the day at the beginning of the fifth month (according to the ancient calendar) was already very hot, so the enemy soldiers of the castle garrison, with the exception of the generals on horses, were lightly clothed and showed their half-naked bodies; likewise, the opponent who cut Kanzaemon off was wearing a bare shoulder, his hair was tangled, and his whole body was drenched in sweat and blood.

He would be approximately the same age as Kanzaemon. His flushed cheeks glowed beautifully with sweat, and the dishevelled hair that fell on his forehead possessed an enigmatic and seductive sensuality that dazzled him. Both his bare chest, which moved violently when he breathed, and the coolness in his armpits when he raised his arms, aroused a fascination in Kanzaemon that was difficult to resist.

"How beautiful", he thought and at once he was overcome by an intense desire: to be hurt by that beautiful boy with all his strength. His opponent seemed to be so tired that he could not even fix his eyes, and even the tip of the *katana* he was wielding above his head was wobbling. If he wanted to kill him, Kanzaemon would not find it difficult at all.

Nevertheless, Kanzaemon dodged the blade of his rival by moving back

¹⁰ This refers to the siege of Osaka Castle, which took place in two campaigns: the winter campaign (1614) and the summer campaign of the following year (1615). The Todo clan supported the Tokugawa, who took over the castle and were victorious in the battle.

and forth, just as if he were cradling a child. And then, he chose the appropriate moment and let himself be cut on the right shoulder. His skin rose and his flesh tore and as soon as he began to bleed, Kanzaemon had a smile of pleasure on his face: it was the feeling of having satisfied a hunger that had been dragging on for years. Then he let the boy cut him little by little, on the torso, thighs and left elbow. Kanzaemon was out of his mind, for with every incision he received he increased this brutal enjoyment.

—Zanami, you're badly hurt. Is he too tough for you? Let me help you, now, — offered his partner Watanabe Kyusuke, who ran up to him when he was covered in blood.

—Don't interfere, — Kanzaemon answered quickly, but Kyusuke immediately noticed the unusual way they were fighting.

—Why don't you just kill him, Zanami? — Watanabe shouted at him and launched a sword attack on the samurai from the castle forces.

—Get out of the way! — yelled Kanzaemon to Watanabe, with his face red with fury, but once he realized that the situation could not continue, he resigned himself and lunged at his opponent's chest. He sliced the boy diagonally from the right shoulder while saying "Forgive me!".

The beautiful boy gave off a pungent smell of blood, twisted in pain, and arched backwards. Seeing this, Kanzaemon became so excited that even his eyes blurred and he froze, as if in a trance.

III

Kanzaemon returned to his hometown of Sunpu in the spring of the fifth year of the Kan'ei era (1628). It had been twelve years since he had left the Todo clan, shortly after the summer campaign, and had become a *ronin*, a samurai with no feudal lord to serve.

Although he had done more than enough in the summer campaign, there were extremely negative rumors about him and he was not rewarded.

While there were, of course, smears that came from envy of the young beginner Kanzaemon's exploits, the smears that had the greatest impact were those of Watanabe Kyusuke.

—I can't understand Zanami's way of fighting. He had a rival in front of him that he could easily beat with a single blow, but he still did nothing to kill him. I went over to finish him off and then he did kill him reluctantly, but while killing him he asked for forgiveness. Could it be that he has some secret connections with the castle?

There was no official investigation, but as soon as he perceived the cold stares of his comrades, Kanzaemon immediately decided to withdraw of his own accord. He was young, confident in his abilities and also had a firmness of character in the face of adversity that would help him make a name for himself anywhere. But the situation throughout the country had changed considerably since the fall of Osaka Castle. It was not easy for him to find a new position to serve as a samurai and he had to wander around.

Even in those moments Kanzaemon persevered and continued to focus his efforts on the way of the blade.

If he found a good teacher, he would go to work for him as a servant and receive his teachings in return. Above all, he studied in depth the *Imagawa* style of Master Imagawa Echizen, in the town surrounding Owari Castle.

The *Imagawa* style was a school whose feature was that it relied on the defensive use of the long sword. It was devised by Imagawa Yoshizane, of the Suruga branch of the Imagawa clan, and consisted of receiving any sort of attack by standing persistently firm until opponent became fatigued and, in the end, defeated with a single knockout blow.

By focusing on the use of the defensive sword, this technique went against the very character of the samurai, so it did not spread too much; it was only briefly exposed somewhat later by Moteji Yasuzaemon of Sendai, and then disappeared completely; however, Imagawa Echizen's defensive sword technique rumored to be truly sublime.

Echizen initiated Kanzaemon into the basics of the *Imagawa* style, but he only used this secret technique on a few occasions.

Since a bloodthirsty nature was still widespread at that time, and swords were occasionally drawn to fight over trifling matters, Kanzaemon generally resorted to the *Tendo* style, which he had been practicing since childhood, and would strike down his rivals on the spot with a wondrous sword blow.

For him, the use of the *Imagawa* style defensive sword was restricted only to cases where the opponent was a beautiful swordsman; in such cases he used it to his heart's content and, although he could dodge his opponent's sword attacks easily, Kanzaemon always missed his strikes and allowed himself to be cut on purpose.

Having sufficiently tasted the joy of being wounded, he also enjoyed the moment when, because of physical and mental exhaustion, his rival staggered with even more seductive beauty, and he stabbed him with a single mortal blow; that was for him the greatest of pleasures.

After many duels, and with his whole body scarred, he returned to his

province of Suruga and opened a *dojo* in the town around Sunpu Castle, which at that time was the residence of Tokugawa Tadanaga.

As soon as Tadanaga learned that there was a unique swordsman living in the city near the castle who was said to be full of scars but an expert in martial arts, he immediately invited Kanzaemon to the castle. In the blink of an eye, Kanzaemon defeated the three swordsmen who had been chosen for the occasion with a wooden sword, and on the spot he was hired for two hundred *koku*¹¹. But it was not until the following year that he exhibited the secret technique of the Imagawa style defensive sword in front of Tadanaga.

In those days, Tadanaga's naturally choleric character was increasingly aggravated by a malignant disease, and he always displayed an irrational anger that chilled the blood of his courtiers. He was also angry that day and said that he did not like page Ichikawa Yanosuke while looking into the eyes of his concubine Aya.

—Don't you have any respect for Tadanaga? How dare you, in the presence of your lord, give that lascivious look to his beloved? Insolence!

— He brought Yanosuke down and beat him on the forehead with all his might with an iron fan. The skin tore and the blood went into his eye.

Yanosuke cried, put his hand to his eye and when he looked up at Tadanaga again, Tadanaga continued:

—You fool, do not look at your master with those eyes!

After hitting him violently again, he shouted:

—Somebody come and kill him!

All those present remained silent and there was not a single one who came instantly to obey him. It would not be the first time that Tadanaga had killed or injured a servant for a trifle, but until recently Yanosuke had been Tadanaga's *chodo*, that is, the protege with whom he had sex. Also present was Den'ichiro, Yanosuke's older brother and known as the clan's greatest expert on the *Toda* style. Everyone feared Tadanaga's wishes so they lowered their heads and looked away.

Tadanaga's eyes stopped at Den'ichiro. Having the older brother murder the younger brother... such cruelty excited Tadanaga's aberrant interest, but just as he was about to give the order, someone raised his voice from the back seats:

—My lord, please wait a moment...

¹¹ Unit of volume representing the amount of rice needed to feed one person over a year (1 *koku* = 150 kg of rice). Many samurai received their stipend in the form of a *koku*, and this unit was also used to measure the wealth of a fiefdom.

That was Zanami Kanzaemon. He quickly stood before Tadanaga and offered himself:

—Sir, a humble servant will kill Yanosuke.

He bowed his head and continued:

—However, my lord, since Yanosuke has caused you displeasure and must be punished for it, I humbly ask that you at least have the indulgence to allow him to do it sword in hand like a warrior.

—To have Yanosuke face someone like you? Hmm... for someone with your skills, that would be like killing a baby. All right. Give Yanosuke a sword!

—My lord, I have one more favor to ask of you. If a servant were to kill Yanosuke, I believe his elder brother, Den'ichiro, who is also present here, would not be pleased. So I ask you to please allow me to face Den'ichiro's sword as well, after I have finished with Yanosuke.

This unexpected statement left all present in awe and with eyes like dishes. But the surprise soon turned to deep admiration. They were impressed by the consideration Kanzaemon showed for others, both by his sense of justice and humanity in wanting to grant Yanosuke a death worthy of a warrior, and by his guts in considering the thoughts of Den'ichiro, who would have to witness the death of his brother. Only someone like Zanami would do such a thing, they thought as they watched him wield his sword.

—A duel to the death against Den'ichiro? He's a good opponent, he'll be interesting. Go ahead, I give you permission.

Tadanaga was intrigued by this new event; as soon as he finished speaking, Kanzaemon thanked him and approached Den'ichiro, who was also sitting in one of the back seats.

—Lord Ichikawa, as you have heard, to avoid you having to lay hands on Yanosuke, one servant has had no choice but to offer himself. Forgive me. In exchange, if a servant were to kill Yanosuke, you must attack me immediately and avenge your brother, — Kanzaemon said quietly to Den'ichiro, who bowed his head to him.

—I thank you very much for your consideration. If you kill Yanosuke, I will attack you without mercy.

—Agreed, then.

Kanzaemon got ready right away and went down to the garden. Yanosuke and Den'ichiro followed. Since it seemed obvious to him that Yanosuke would be defeated in one fell swoop, Den'ichiro began to prepare: he tied a ribbon around his kimono sleeves, loosened the blade at the mouth of the sheath, and sat down on the ground with one knee up.

With Yanosuke already in front of him, Kanzaemon declared aloud, addressing Tadanaga first and then all present:

—Gentlemen, look closely at the essence of the *Imagawa* style defensive sword mastered by Zanami.

Everyone had only heard of the *Imagawa* style defensive sword, but none had seen it; they all swallowed up the thought that perhaps it was a matter of stopping Yanosuke's first sword strike and, using his momentum, cutting it in two.

The duel took a completely unexpected form, however.

Yanosuke had resigned himself to the idea that he was going to die and set about attacking Kanzaemon with his *katana*, but he, despite proving time and again that he could dodge it without trouble, was caught on one such occasion and received a cut on the upper arm.

People were beginning to wonder, but the Kanzaemon himself smiled and kept slipping left and right, and once again he was caught and his earlobe became bloodshot.

The first time he received a cut, the attendants interpreted it as a small deference to Yanosuke before he died, but the unexplained handling of the Kanzaemon blade caused quite a stir.

—What are you doing, Zanami? It looks like you're letting yourself get cut up on purpose...

—I don't understand either, that in order to show us the secrets of the *Imagawa* style defensive sword he lets himself be cut on purpose.

—Look, doesn't it seem like Zanami's trying to get Yanosuke to kill him? Kanzaemon was already bleeding from five wounds. And yet there was a smile on his face that expressed an increasingly suspicious joy.

Earlier, when he saw the extraordinarily beautiful face of Yanosuke, covered in blood after being struck on the forehead by Tadanaga, he felt the blood begin to boil all over his body.

"I would like that beautiful young man to cut me to his heart's content and in the end, I would like to tear this tender meat to pieces."

After a long time, his strange vice asked for blood and was out of control. The pleasant pain in the parts of his body that had received Yanosuke's cuts caused him to enter a state similar to drunkenness, but when he saw that Yanosuke was already having trouble breathing and that the tip of his blade was wobbling from side to side, his head began to burn.

—Forgive me! — he shouted, and instantly pounced on his opponent and cut him down from the middle of his forehead.

He was bathed in the stream of blood and felt a supreme pleasure that

overwhelmed him and made him forget everything, but then Den'ichiro flew towards him like a bird.

—En garde!

It seemed as if Kanzaemon was going to sleepwalk right into the mighty and powerful sword that was thrown at him, but suddenly striking back, he brought Den'ichiro down with a clean diagonal cut from the shoulder.

IV

The strange attitude of Kanzaemon, who crossed swords with the weak Yanosuke for nearly half an hour but defeated the mighty blade of Den'ichiro with a single blow, gave rise to much speculation and rumor; in the end everyone concluded, shaking their heads and shrugging, that there was no doubt that the blade was fearsome and grew stronger depending upon the opponent.

Two days later as he was preparing to leave the castle, a voice from behind stopped Kanzaemon. A warrior he had barely seen approached him.

—Since I am on duty in Kofu, we haven't had the pleasure yet, so I will introduce myself: my name is Isoda Hisanoshin, pleased to meet you.

—Isoda?

—I am the successor to your uncle, Isoda Gunbee.

—Ah, so you're Kinu's husband... — it had come to his attention that his parents passed away, but he knew nothing of Kinu's fate.

—That's right, I married Kinu. Since you and Kinu are cousins, I would like us to become well acquainted.

Hisanoshin praised Kanzaemon's martial arts, which he had the opportunity to witness the other day, and then invited him to visit his humble home as he too aspired to deepen his swordplay. Surely, Kinu would be delighted to see him as well. Kanzaemon accepted the invitation and was accompanied by Hisanoshin to the Isoda residence. When, after thirteen years, he saw Kinu's face again, the two cousins were so surprised that they even doubted what their eyes were seeing.

While what surprised Kinu was to see that the face of his cousin, whom he remembered with the pale complexion of his childhood, had become a fearsome, scarred face, what surprised Kanzaemon was that Kinu looked so much like Nahome, his beloved and longed-for aunt who was still etched in his memory; one could say that they resembled each other like two drops of water.

From that day on he was possessed by a vehement obsession that ate away at him: he wanted Kinu to hurt him and then he wanted to cut Kinu

himself. Kanzaemon was afraid of that abominable obsession, ashamed and worried. He severely restricted himself and swore that he would rid himself of such thoughts.

It was at this time that he went to the Ox Sanctuary, where he would perform ablutions with cold water in the freezing nights and pray that he could be freed from those despicable thoughts. In the end he even thought of giving up his remuneration and sacrificing his entire future by disappearing from Sunpu.

But prudence, introspection and his own reproach could not contain the intense desire, which was increasing day by day. It reached the point that when he visited the mansion to which Hisanoshin had invited and accompanied him for no ulterior motive, and observed Kinu's face as she told him nostalgic memories of the past, his throat would dry up and his knees would shake.

Kanzaemon was becoming increasingly haggard and absorbed in his thoughts, and rumors among his peers grew. Kanzaemon then strengthened himself in his final decision:

"Even if I'm considered a brute or a demon, even if the afterlife is hell and I have to suffer until the end of time, I can't stay without Kinu cutting me and me cutting her."

It is clear that Kanzaemon's mind was on the road to insanity. Had it not been for his eccentric state of mind, he might not have been able to devise a strategy to get Kinu to lacerate him.

On June 14, in the sixth year of the Kan'ei era (1629), a play was performed, in the presence of the feudal lord, by the Konparu and Kanzen schools who had come from Edo. The samurai of the clan took their seats in front of the newly installed stage in the west courtyard of the castle interior. Tadanaga sat upstairs, in the main box.

Kanzaemon invited Hisanoshin and they were sitting on the grass watching the show, a little away from the others, when Kanzaemon whispered in Hisanoshin's ear:

—Do you think you could attack Konparu Hachiro while he's dancing? Hisanoshin turned to Kanzaemon to answer, but when he understood the meaning of the question he laid his eyes on the stage again and concentrated on the actor Konparu Hachiro. Obviously, what Kanzaemon was implying was not that Konparu had any knowledge of swordplay. However, as he had dedicated his life to the theatre, his figure had reached the zenith of excellence and did not have a single flaw; his whole body radiated an intense inner strength which suggested that as long as he was

dancing on a stage, nothing and no one could get near him, and he even gave off a penetrating and threatening aura.

The previous January 2nd, at the opening ceremony of a no recital at Chiyoda Castle (Edo) on the occasion of the *shogun's* visit, the sword master Yagyu Munenori was present and when he saw the dancing silhouette of Konparu Hachiro, he commented:

—It adopts poses that would be hard to attack even for the most prominent experts of martial arts.

Rumors of his words of admiration had reached these lands as well.

—I think it is not impossible to attack, — Hisanoshin replied after a while.

—Ha-ha-ha! Really? — Kanzaemon replied in a strange voice.

—Are you suggesting that he is invincible? — the tone of that mocking laughter had offended Hisanoshin.

—It would be very difficult for you.

—What?!

—Well, with your technique it would be very difficult for you.

—Zanami, there are some things you shouldn't tell a friend. You've been very rude.

—Precisely because there's trust, I must tell you the truth without qualms.

—Do you know what you're saying? — Hisanoshin looked at him sideways, implying that in the field of martial arts he would not tolerate such defamation.

—There is no need to be frantic. If you were to throw yourself at him with that face, before you could even get on stage, Konparu Hachiro would have sensed the threat and fled away. You would have no chance to attack him. You are an amateur, starting from the mental training.

—Hey!

—To attack someone you do not have to make a scary face, but you have to do it quickly and quietly.

—Like this? — Hisanoshin lost his patience, pulled out a dagger and quickly attacked Kanzaemon.

The nearby clan members began to rise alerted by the glare of the dagger, however, Kanzaemon had already risen to his feet and wielded his own blood-covered dagger. Hisanoshin had been cut from his left shoulder to his chest, he staggered a few times and fell heavily to the ground, where he laid with his face down.

Kanzaemon silently wiped the blood from the dagger and returned it to its sheath. Then he addressed the people who rushed to him:

—Gentlemen, Hisanoshin suddenly lost his head and without a word

attacked me, so I was forced to end his life. I await your verdict on this crime which has unleashed such a quarrel in your presence.

As a result of the investigation, not a single evidence was found against Kanzaemon as no one had heard the conversation between the two, furthermore, all those around them confirmed that it was Hisanoshin who had drawn his dagger and suddenly attacked his friend. Again Kanzaemon's skill with the blade received praise from people, who admired that he had been able to stop a lunatic so quickly with only a small dagger.

He was eventually pardoned, but Kanzaemon had been temporarily taken into custody at the mansion of guard captain Watanabe Kenmotsu, as he had ultimately murdered a member of the clan in the same compound where the feudal lord was enjoying a play.

At the same time, a written request from Hisanoshin's wife Kinu was delivered to the advisor of the *daimyo* Saegusa Izunokami. In the letter she said that she did not consider her husband Hisanoshin a madman who would lose his mind and go insane, and what probably happened was that Kanzaemon somehow made him draw the dagger. She was asking to be able to avenge her husband with a sword.

The officers quickly rejected her request, considering that Hisanoshin was entirely to blame and that, with her female body, no matter how hard she fought, she would not be able to make a single scratch on Kanzaemon. However, Kinu was persistent in her requests and in the end Tadanaga granted her permission.

—When my master gets an idea in his head, there's nothing to be done. If there is no other option, let us make it a public duel on the grounds of the next duelling tournament in the presence of my lord. Although it will naturally not be a serious match, it will also be interesting to have a woman participate, — decided Saegusa Izunokami.

And so it was that Kinu's revenge became the second match in the duel-to-the-death tournament at Sunpu Castle, in the presence of Tadanaga.

In the first match, the one-armed swordsman Fujiki Gennosuke had defeated the notorious secret technique of the diabolical blind swordsman Irako Seigen's *Mumyo sakanagare*. Once new sand had been scattered on the battlefield, which had been stained by the blood spilled by Irako, Zanami Kanzaemon and Isoda Kinu entered the compound.

The ferocious silhouette of Kinu, her long black hair hidden from the roots by a tight white ribbon, dressed from head to toe in pristine white¹² and carrying a *naginata*¹³, totally resigned to her fate, was so beautiful that for a few moments it took the audience's breath away. In front of her, Kanzaemon's eyes, on that wounded face, shone brightly and were already full of frenzied delight and intoxicated with blood.

Knowing Kinu's personality, Kanzaemon knew that she would devise a plan to avenge her late husband, and during the two and a half months she remained in custody, she waited and wished day and night for that moment to come.

Of course Kinu didn't think it was possible for her to defeat Kanzaemon. Since she had set out only to harm her opponent with a single blow, she suddenly rushed to attack him from the side; he dodged her but then she lifted the *naginata* and with a downward stroke hit him in the middle of the forehead. Then she tried to overwhelm him with all sorts of blows, which he dodged, until she became exasperated and finally, with a blow that seemed impossible for the inexperienced woman, she unexpectedly pushed the sword of Kanzaemon with which he was trying to defend himself and cut his right cheek. Feeling the blood rushing to his cheek, Kanzaemon went into ecstasy and lost his self-control. Two blows, three... all of them were initiated by him, but they ended up causing the tip of Kinu's *naginata* to hit his body and cut into his arm and thigh.

That was a sensation of pleasure as if the body were dissolving into an iridescent cloud. All of his limbs were screaming: *cut more, please cut me more*.

It was not Kinu that he saw before his eyes but his aunt Nahome, with her comb in her hand, gently rebuking him with her gaze. Kanzaemon returned to his childish body and with sweet thoughts of being spoiled and punished by his aunt he became obsessed.

To the surprise of all onlookers, Kanzaemon had already given up using the sword. He was waiting for the ultimate moment when, after allowing Kinu to cut him down at will, he would defeat her with a single stroke of his blade. By then, however, both Kinu's spirit and body had already reached their limits.

—It's over.

Kinu prepared for the last moments of his enemy, who would be struck down with a cut that would split him in two; she stepped forward, raised

¹² White is the traditional color of mourning in Japan.

¹³ Instrument used in martial arts consisting of a long pole with a curved sword-like blade at the tip.

the *naginata* and struck him in the forehead with a *kabuto-wari* ("helmet-breaker").

Kanzaemon felt his forehead crack and, when he sensed his end approaching, he cut Kinu down diagonally from his left shoulder and smiled.

Suddenly, amidst the confusion created in the enclosure, staggering with the *naginata* as her walking stick, Kinu barely managed to get back on her feet.

In front of her eyes was the body of Kanzaemon lying on the ground, still with that enigmatic smile on his lips and his brains sticking out like a pomegranate split in half.

At the climax of his ecstasy, Kanzaemon had completely lost the fighting strength of his body and soul. In the midst of the trance the blade he wielded had barely grazed Kinu's sleeve, and he had fallen limp to the ground.

MINEUCHI FUSETSU

(«The non-lethal back of the sword»)

I

—Don't kill me, Gunnoshin, don't kill me! Stop, please! I beg you! Put the *katana* away!

If there was one tone of voice that could be considered appropriate for the plea, that would be exactly what Yukinosuke used at the time when he uttered these words.

Though he had no choice but to draw his blade he had not been on guard but, using a column as a shield, standing in the outer corridor that overlook the garden, he raised a hand to his opponent and prepared for an imminent escape.

—Shit! I'll cut you! En garde, you coward! — Gunnoshin's eyes were bloodshot, and because of the drunkenness and agitation caused by all the sake he had drunk, the muscles on his bare chest were shaking violently.

—Stop it, Kurokawa, don't do anything stupid!

—Kurokawa, sheath the sword. Have you lost your mind?

Both the host, Ishida Sanbee, and Arakawa Kyutaro were trying to pin Gunnoshin down from behind, but every time they tried he swung his sword like a lunatic and prevented them from getting close. Taking advantage of that commotion, Yukinosuke jumped barefoot into the garden, but the other man chased and cornered him under a large plum tree.

—Were you trying to escape? Coward! And yet you're an assistant instructor at the Shibukawa *dojo*?

—What?! — Yukinosuke's eyes lit up, but he came to his senses right away, — Gunnoshin, stop it. If I made a mistake, I do apologize.

—Hey, don't whine now!

Gunnoshin suddenly threw himself and as he lowered his *katana* from its above-head position, he slashed a branch of the plum tree without a single petal falling from its flowers. When it seemed that the sword would tear Yukinosuke's right cheek as well, despite the fact that Yukinosuke had made a firm resolution not to attack no matter how much his opponent attacked him, he stopped Gunnoshin's *katana* and almost involuntarily stretched his out and cut horizontally.

—Grrr... mmm...

—Damn it! — as Yukinosuke watched Gunnoshin's body fall apart, he bit

his lip, disgruntled and with his bloody sword still hanging in his hand. When he became aware that blood was suddenly flowing from his head to his torso, he gritted his teeth.

—Kurokawa!

—Hold on, Gunnoshin!

Sanbee and Kyutaro rushed over and helped Gunnoshin to sit up, but he had almost lost consciousness and was groaning. They immediately sent for Dr. Tsusai.

—It is a very serious injury. If it worsens, there is surely nothing we can do for him, — Tsusai diagnosed after the first aid was completed.

—You saw it. I tried hard to avoid using the sword, but all my efforts were in vain. I would like to receive the punishment that I am entitled to under the law for the crime of having injured a fellow samurai, — Yukinosuke said to the host Sanbee, sitting formally on the tatami in a room in his home, and then closed his eyes. On those closed eyelids, Mie's sad and resentful look appeared.

—No, Tsukioka, it wasn't your fault. From start to finish, the culprit was only Kurokawa. Both Arakawa and I are well aware of that. The self-control you showed was admirable. However...

The point was that, anyway, it was a fact that had hurt him. They had to think of some countermeasures to remedy it. Ishida Gunbee folded his arms and spent quite a bit time thinking.

—Even if Kurokawa survived, it would not do his family's honor that he lost control because of sake and was injured after drawing his sword irrationally. However, if it were reported that it was an ordinary duel, it is certain that Tsukioka, who played a completely passive role, would be punished. Let's see how would you like this: only the three of us know the details of the event, so we can force Tsusai to be silent and put Gunnoshin through a sudden illness; and if Gunnoshin died, we would say it happened because of the illness and ask his cousin Kojiro, who lives in Edo, to become the new head of the family.

Ishida thus convinced Yukinosuke, who insisted that it would be a disgrace to him, and a messenger was immediately sent to Gunnoshin's residence.

—I can't appear before Mie, so I'm saying goodbye to you. I'm sorry. — with these words Yukinosuke went to sleep. That day he couldn't sleep all night.

II

He worried not because he'd hurt someone with his sword. He had already experienced what it was like to bathe the *katana* in blood on three occasions. And all three times he had killed his opponents.

"What will Mie think?"

It was that thought that kept Yukinosuke from falling asleep all night. He had injured Mie's older brother, with whom she had such a close relationship; perhaps he would not survive and then it would become his fourth murder.

"My arms are cursed."

Yukinosuke blamed himself, agonized, regretted, and wept. In that situation he had no choice. His only intention was to intercept Gunnoshin's *katana*. He magnificently struck with his sword and cut Gunnoshin's chest because that was precisely the essence of the *ukifune* technique of the Toda School: the defensive sword was simultaneously transformed into the offensive sword.

—Look at this cut. He mowed the branch without a single petal falling. Even if Gunnoshin was drunk, the tip of his blade was sharp as if he was sober. Now, Yukinosuke's ability to stop that sword and slice through it horizontally... was splendid, what else can we say? — Ishida Sanbee told Arakawa Kyutaro when they were on their own.

But that magnificent ability was more of a source of resentment.

"Will Mie believe me when I tell her the truth? And will she forgive me for hurting her brother?"

His personality was not at all violent or reckless. Rather, he had a quiet and reserved character. This was recognized by his teacher and his classmates. And yet, both the teacher and his classmates claimed:

—The tip of Tsukioka's sword has a threatening aura.

"They may be saying this because they know that in the Hizen fief of the Nabeshima clan I killed someone, but since then I have made a firm resolution never to hurt anyone, and I was striving to remain serene and not show bloodlust to anyone."

In Hizen, he first took the life of Fujikura Yago, but this was inevitable because of the heat of the moment. As he lifted the curtains, a gust of air came in. It caused the water in the cup Yago held in his hand to spill over his knees. The whole thing was completely unintentional.

—I'm so sorry, excuse me, — Yukinosuke immediately excused himself

when he realized what happened, but Yago threw the remaining water in his face. He was able to quickly dodge but it fell on his chest and left him standing with the water dripping.

Yago drew the *katana* and attacked Yukinosuke before he could rebuke Yago for his rudeness. Immediately after, Yukinosuke's blade stopped the attack and cut Yago from shoulder to chest.

None of those present sided with Yago since he usually was arrogant, boastful of his abilities and took advantage of the privileges of being the feudal lord's *chodo*. Everyone easily agreed with Yukinosuke's behavior, but feudal lord Nabeshima Katsushige was of a different opinion:

—Kill that insolent man, — he ordered.

That feudal lord was not one of the *fudai daimyo*¹⁴ who had supported the Tokugawa. Yukinosuke's young heart rebelled and following the recommendation of a close friend, he left the fief and became a masterless samurai. On the orders of the feudal lord, two samurai of the clan had chased him to the borders. At the Boju mountain pass, Yukinosuke stood up to them and said with a sorrowful look:

—Kumoi, Kuwata, I beg you, go back and say you didn't get me. There's no need for bloodshed.

—We don't hold any grudges against you either but these are our lord's orders, so we have no other choice.

—I don't want to kill you. I beg you. Turn a blind eye, — Yukinosuke insisted without even being on guard but Kuwata launched an attack on him without saying a single word.

His first blow killed Kuwata and then he, reluctantly, downed Kumoi. After that he fled to the Chugoku region.

Due to the *hokokamai*¹⁵ letter that the feudal lord circulated as a punishment for his desertion, it was impossible for him to find anyone to serve. He wandered around and ended up reaching the city surrounding Nagoya Castle, in the Owari fief. There, while attending Shibukawa Shogoro's *dojo*, he showed his skills and was recommended to the lord of the fief, whom he began to serve after changing his royal name (Shigetomi) to Tsukioka.

Protests from the fiefdom of Nabeshima came immediately, but because of

¹⁴ The feudal daimyo were feudal lords who had supported the Tokugawa for generations. The Nabeshima clan, on the other hand, were *tozama daimyo*, as they had only submitted to the Tokugawas after being defeated at the Battle of Sekigahara (1600), and were viewed with suspicion.

¹⁵ A circular with which the feudal lords punished the deserters, preventing them from serving in other fiefdoms and condemning them to exile.

the authority granted to Owari by belonging to one of the three branches of the Tokugawa¹⁶ family, they could afford to deny the will of another lord. For that alone Yukinosuke sought to be as discreet as possible and gave himself humbly and faithfully to the service. Ever since he had met Gunnoshin's younger sister Mie, he had begun to picture a pleasant future for himself in his dreams and behaved with unusual modesty in front of his peers and acquaintances, but for some strange reason he could not get along with Gunnoshin.

Their personalities were very different and the outcome of the struggle between the two for the position of assistant instructor at the Shibukawa dojo also played a role. But Gunnoshin, too, made absurd excuses not justified by his drunkenness, and thus explained why on this or that occasion he drew his *katana* and launched an attack:

—Maybe there's a terrifying killer instinct inside me that's asking for blood. Pathetic.

Yukinosuke remembered again Mie's large, sad eyes staring at him, and again started to toss and turn not being able to sleep.

III

Apparently, it's totally impossible to keep a secret known by more than one person. Gunnoshin died next day, at dusk, and before long his death and it's real circumstances were almost openly gossiped about throughout the fiefdom. The officials agreed that if the matter became public it would destroy the Kurokawa family, and that Tsukioka would have to be punished in some way, so they simply pretended that they had heard nothing.

But then, as is often the case, a troublemaker appeared: Yabe Rokudayu, Gunnoshin's uncle, who, even though he was an uncle, was about the same age as Gunnoshin.

—That wretch Tsukioka killed Gunnoshin, and you're going to leave him as he is? A true warrior does no such thing!

Rokudayu pretended to know nothing, though in reality he was aware of Gunnoshin's guilt and that complicating things further, in a reckless manner, would only cause problems for the honor of the Kurokawa family and for his own; but no matter how much he was reminded about it, he could not remain silent.

¹⁶ The Owari were one of the three branches of the Tokugawa clan, along with the Kii branch and the Mito branch (all descendants of the younger sons of the clan's founder, Tokugawa Ieyasu), which gave them the favor of the shogun.

Rokudayu also was an expert in the art of *Iai* from the Tamiya school: drawing, cutting the opponent and re-sheathing the sword. He was confident that regardless of Yukinosuke's skill he would win easily. If he will be forced by Yukinosuke to draw his *katana* first and then kill him, then he would have full right to do so. Thus Rokudayu tried to provoke Yukinosuke again and again but Yukinosuke, for his part, skillfully avoided these attempts by turning a deaf ear.

Several days later, Yukinosuke received a letter that Mie had sent to him in secret:

"Mr. Ishida and Mr. Arakawa have informed me of the absurd pretexts my brother used under the influence of alcohol. I don't hold any grudges against Mr. Yukinosuke. I feel only sadness and regret."

Every trace of her writing seemed like she was in tears.

—Mie, I'm sorry, — he whispered as his own eyes filled with tears. He again promised himself that from then on, whatever happened, he would never hurt another person. But what is perfectly straight will always appear crooked in a distorted mirror. Rokudayu interpreted Yukinosuke's mild-mannered attitude as a simple mockery. He thought that Yukinosuke was implying, "amateur, you're no match for me".

IV

On the third day of the great festival at Nagoya's Tosho-gu shrine, which had begun on April 15th, a portable *mikoshi* shrine was carried in a procession to Honmachidori and at night floats came out — the pride of every town — from Shimoshichiken-cho, Miyamachi, Kyomachi, Nakaichiba-cho, and Tenma-cho. The atmosphere was one of carnival never seen before in Edo.

A large group of young samurai descending from the castle met at the western gate, which led from the outer wall to the Tenno shrine.

—What do you say if we go see the festival? From this year, the Shimoshichiken-cho float is said to represent Benkei¹⁷ on the bridge.

—Yes, you can see it has a mechanism that makes a Ushiwaka¹⁸ doll jump onto Benkei's *naginata* every time the float makes a turn.

—Ha-ha-ha! More than just going to see it, you want to go around Zomeki's red-light district afterwards, don't you?

¹⁷ According to legend, the warrior monk Benkei would challenge anyone who wanted to cross the Gojos Bridge (Kyoto) and after defeating them he would keep his swords. He did so with 999 swords, until young Minamoto no Yoshitsune defeated him. Since then Benkei became his faithful vassal and companion.

¹⁸ Name by which Minamoto no Yoshitsune was known in his childhood.

—No, for that I'd rather go to Nishikoji¹⁹, to the Yamagata brothel... Hee-hee!

—Shame on you, don't laugh so strangely when you remember it.

Rokudayu recognized Yukinosuke among his companions who were laughing and having a good time. He approached him quickly and said:

—Tsukioka, do me a favor and go away.

—What?

—It could be considered that, since you've entered the castle, everyone here is of your lineage. A newcomer like you cannot just join the group of friends.

—What kind of nonsense are you talking about? — one of the companions rebuked him, embarrassed. But Rokudayu kept looking at Yukinosuke with a hateful face and went on:

—Someone who has just arrived must behave with the modesty of a newcomer. You should stop poking around where you are not wanted. These were rude and meaningless words. Everyone present become very tense, for they thought it would not stay that way; but Yukinosuke himself replied with a smile on his lips:

—I'm very sorry, I was too bold. I will be more discreet from now on, — after uttering these words he tried to leave as quickly as he could, but Rokudayu held him back with a sharp cry:

—Tsukioka, you were smiling now, weren't you? Are you making fun of us? — this was clearly more than a false accusation: he was deliberately looking for a fight.

—Yabe, stop it.

—Rokudayuu, you've gone a bit too far.

Taking advantage of these reprimands, Yukinosuke said goodbye and left. But that same night, at time of the boar — about ten o'clock at night — a very drunk Rokudayu had said goodbye to his companions and was returning through the stable area, near the gateway to Honmachi, when he came across Yukinosuke, who, unfortunately, was on the way from Shichikencho at that moment.

—Oh, Tsukioka! Wait!

—Yabe, you're drunk, aren't you?

—Even if I'm drunk, I don't let my mind wander away, and you won't get away from me tonight. Let's talk, about Gunnoshin... and don't tell me you don't know anything.

¹⁹ *Old red light district in Nagoya.*

—If you already know, there's nothing more to talk about. That happened because I had no choice, and I'm very sorry.

—Huh! You're really sorry? Duel a man like me and get it over with!

—I won't. I don't want to draw my sword anymore.

—If I attack you and make you draw, no one will hold it against me. That's right, I won't fall into that trap. Fight, coward!

Yukinosuke took a couple of steps backwards as he sensed danger, for he knew that as soon as Yabe got his hands on his blade, he would draw it and approach to attack. As if the urge to unsheath his sword was difficult to suppress, Rokudayu drew his infamous *iai*.

It seemed that just after his war cry the opponent would've been split in two but Rokudayu had drunk too much and that momentarily affected the trajectory of his *katana*. It was not his opponent who collapsed and groaned but Rokudayu himself.

As Yukinosuke stared at silhouette laying prostrate on the ground, upside down, he suddenly felt dizzy and everything before his eyes turned black. "Again..."

This time there was not a single witness at his side. Even if he was accused of attacking Yabe, he could not justify himself in any way. He had killed a companion on the night of the great festival in front of the moat; he had killed Mie's uncle at the foot of the castle.

He knelt and confirmed that Rokudayu was no longer breathing, then he headed for the Kurokawa residence in Buhei-cho, staggering like a lost soul. His intention was to see Mie.

V

It was two years after, in the spring, that it came to the attention of the castle lord Tadanaga — an unique swordsman called Hoshikawa Ikunosuke had opened a *dojo* in Hasederacho (Sunpu). On the sign hanging on the facade it read: "Instruction in the *Toda* style". This technique was so extraordinary that it could be considered infallible, so rumors spread from one place to another and the number of students who signed up was considerable.

One day, a martial arts expert proposed to the *dojo* a duel between different schools, which was not unusual at that time; they fought each other up to three times, and although his intention was to fight as equals, after being defeated all three times, he became furious and insisted on fighting a duel with real swords.

It seemed that Ikunosuke was having second thoughts, but on the contrary, he readily agreed.

—Don't worry, — he said to his disciples with a smile, and then he calmly drew his thin sword and took up a stance of attack aimed at the eyes of his opponent.

His figure did not inspire any fighting spirit in his opponent, who saw him as an easy target, so the warrior rushed to attack him. Ikunosuke persistently defended himself against his opponent with his *katana*, but just when it looked like he would repel the blow coming after his opponent swung the sword over his head, a cry was heard that reached the disciples' insides. The rival warrior became stiff, turned around and fell to the ground.

Ikunosuke looked first at the body of his opponent then turned his gaze to his own sword. A satisfied smile spread across his lips. There was not a drop of blood on the sword. He had struck his opponent with the back of his sword and the warrior had lost consciousness.

The disciples were speechless at their master's prowess. But when they were able to question him about the sword technique that he had never shown even to them before, Ikunosuke held a hand to his forehead before answering:

—Well, then... Although it doesn't have any special name... If you force me to give it one, I suppose we could call it "the non-lethal sword that strikes with the back".

As soon as this story reached the ears of the lord of Sunpu Castle through disciples who were vassals of the fief, Tadanaga (who was enthusiastic about anything unusual) summoned Hoshikawa Ikunosuke to the castle and had him confront several warriors of the fief with real swords; all without exception, after a few attempts to attack, received a single blow from the back of Ikunosuke's sword and passed out. Ikunosuke declined the offer to enter the service of the castle, accepted the praises and left. Needless to say, that Hoshikawa Ikunosuke was actually Tsukioka Yukinosuke. After killing Rokudayu, Yukinosuke went to the Kurokawa residence and told Mie what had happened in detail.

—Mie, fate wanted me to kill your brother and your uncle, and I don't want to exist anymore. My wish is that you kill me with your own hands. Mie listened in awe to the events he was telling her, but when it came to this point, she shook her head vehemently.

—No. Both my brother and my uncle made unfair accusations about Yukinosuke. Why should I kill you?

—So then, Mie, I'll perform the *seppuku*, and ask you to be my assistant²⁰ during the suicide.

—It can't be, Yukinosuke, you shouldn't die.

—You're wrong, I've killed two comrades and can't escape *seppuku*.

—Please run away. Run away and keep on living. If you are still alive somewhere, I can still think of you, but if you die, I will die, too.

Finally succumbing to Mie's heartbreaking request to flee before the officers took action, he left the place and took refuge in Nagoya.

While hiding in a mountain village in Hida, Yukinosuke met the monk Soshin of Gakusen Temple who taught him a new path in life.

—I'm cursed. If I draw the *katana*, I will surely kill someone, — Yukinosuke lamented.

—Then you should not draw, — Soshin replied.

—But I am a warrior, I cannot do such a thing.

—In that case, it would be enough if you, despite drawing and attacking, won't kill anyone.

—But how could I do something like that? I don't know.

—I don't know either. It's the way of the sword — you should think about it and find out yourself.

He began to think and think about a method with which, even if he drew and attacked someone with the *katana*, he would not kill them. When he finally found the solution, it turned out that the theory was quite simple: instead of attacking with the edge of the sword he had to attack with the back.

Although it sounded easy, in a duel to the death against a rival who attacked willing to kill you it was not easy to fight, so it was much more complicated to strike with the back of the sword at the moment of decision between life and death.

"And yet there's no other way to escape my bloody murdering sword."

For over a year Yukinosuke worked hard to improve and polish this technique. He finally mastered the secret technique of striking with the back of his sword: while receiving the last blow from his opponent, before attacking, he made sure to turn the blade of his sword by 180 degrees with the palm of his hand. Now, even without being particularly aware of it, the blade that was going to attack his rival turned automatically, and when he withdrew it, it turned again and returned to its original position.

²⁰ A person who was in charge of beheading the person who was doing the *harakiri* after he had cut his belly.

—This way, even if I were to throw myself at my opponent, I won't kill him.

Yukinosuke was relieved and went to the city surrounding Sunpu Castle.

VI

Kurokawa Kojiro, who was serving in Edo, was informed of the violent death of his uncle Yabe Rokudayu and the escape of his murderer, Tsukioka Yukinosuke. At the same time he was also made aware of the cause of death of his cousin Kurokawa Gunnoshin, which had been kept from him until then. Although he had been named as the successor to the head of the Kurokawa family due to Gunnoshin's sudden death, he was completely convinced that Gunnoshin had died as a result of illness. For Kojiro it was an unexpected stroke of luck to go from being the second son of a poor family to becoming the heir to the Kurokawa family, who had a stipend of three hundred *koku*. But more than that, what really got his heart pounding was his thinking that by becoming the heir to the Kurokawa family he would also end up marrying Mie.

Kojiro had been deeply in love with his cousin Mie, who was his own age, since he was a teenager living in Nagoya. Despite being the second son he had been appointed as a weapons inspector because of his exceptional mastery of martial arts. However, when he reflected on his meagre stipend of twenty *koku* for three people, and especially on his unattractive physique, despair drove him to give up, and his feelings for Mie pierced his young soul and caused him intense pain as if his nails were torn out. What he did was to distract his sorrows through the method young men usually resort to in such situations: he frequented a brothel in the red-light district of Nishikoji, at the foot of the castle, and immersed himself in alcohol and women.

One night, after drinking until he was completely drunk, he had an argument with a merchant who was in the same brothel and in a fight he hurt the merchant. Seeing that illegal bloodshed stained the world of pleasure²¹, a crowd of young men gathered and beat Kojiro.

Despite being outnumbered, in the end he managed to slip away and run until he reached Hiya-cho, but he was already exhausted and without strength left, so his pursuers managed to corner him. Just at that moment of greatest danger, the one who rescued him was precisely Tsukioka Yukinosuke who was passing by.

²¹ *At that time brothels and other entertainment establishments were concentrated in specific districts authorized for this purpose, and therefore within the law.*

Also, when the rumors began to rise in the city and an official investigation was opened, Yukinosuke was called as a witness, but he testified with a surprised look on his face:

—That's ridiculous. It is true that a few nights ago I helped a man in the guise of a samurai to escape because of our connection as warriors, but he was a man who looked nothing like Kojiro. I fear it was all a mistake. Someone like Kojiro cannot be beaten up by merchants just like that. It seems that even the hierarchical superiors knew that this was a lie but were deceived by this selflessness, and soon after Kojiro was sent to Edo, without receiving any serious punishment.

Since his arrival in Edo he became severely frustrated and devoted all his attention to martial arts. As a teacher he had Kanezawa Ichiusai, of the *Mugen-Itto* style, who had founded a *dojo* in Yamashita-cho. To compensate for his past immoral behaviour and to get rid of his feelings towards Mie, Kojiro devoted himself, body and soul, to the way of the sword, and his progress was magnificent.

It was at this point that the decree came unexpectedly, making him the heir to the Kurokawa family. But with the letter he received afterwards, all his joy vanished. Although he would become the new head of the family, it was clear that he would not marry Mie.

He reread the paragraph that said "at Mie's request" and a contemptuous chuckle escaped him.

—I'm not surprised she hates me so much. It's because of this ugly face I have.

From the next day, as if he had forgotten everything, he immersed himself in the practice of the sword even more intensely. Three months passed before he received another letter: he was informed of the violent death of his uncle Rokudayu. He found it impossible to believe that Tsukioka Yukinosuke was the culprit, and even more so when he learned that Yukinosuke was also the murderer of his cousin Gunnoshin.

—That gentle and understanding Tsukioka has... — again and again he tried to say it to himself, but the reality was just too hard to swallow. Although he could do nothing for Gunnoshin officially, as a nephew he had to avenge his uncle Rokudayu's death. He knew that Yukinosuke's mastery of the blade was formidable, but he too had become one of the top three disciples of the Ichiusai *dojo*, so he thought Tsukioka could not defeat him so easily. His rival, however, was the benefactor who had saved him when, after sinking in a bog of self-indulgent pleasure, he was about to receive the dangerous humiliation from the merchants. The event became a turning point in his life. Not only that, but he was one of the

most respected people in the Owari fiefdom. By contrast, it was his immediate family, Gunnoshin and Rokudayu, who were despised. The youthful purity and naivety of Kojiru, which remained intact despite his life halfway between debauchery and discipline, made him agonize over this dilemma.

In the letter, they wrote that Tsukioka had fled and his whereabouts were unknown but it seemed possible that he had headed for Edo, so they were investigating there too, and as soon as something became known they would get in touch.

All those in charge of the case were relieved of their duties and he was ordered to continue the search for Tsukioka. He then explained the situation to his master Ichiusai, who replied:

—I do not know what this Tsukioka is capable of, but if you are willing to sacrifice your life, nothing will stop you from taking revenge. It's just that... Kojiro, you are hiding something, aren't you?

—What?

Kojiro hesitated for a few moments, but finally explained that he was suffering because he had to kill his benefactor in the name of a person for whom, despite being of his own blood, he felt neither affection nor respect. Ichiusai listened to him with a keen eye, but when he finished speaking the expression of his master still seemed to harbor doubts.

—Kojiro, I understand the circumstances. But what I want to hear isn't just that. Ever since you entered this *dojo*, there has always been a part of you that I did not fully understand. Though your blade is unmatched, there is one decisive thing that it is not capable of cutting. Moreover, it is precisely that thing that marks the barrier between mastering the true essence of the sword or not. What I believe is that there is something that remains in the depths of your heart, like an obsession that traps your soul and does not let go.

Kojiro, surprised, felt a twinge in his chest and noticed that his master's power of intuition was causing him to sweat. Until now he had told no one of the secret of his heart: his love for Mie, a lasting affection and love that made him feel a deep sense of shame and that, no matter how hard he tried, he could not get rid of. This time he confessed everything to his master.

—It's not warrior-like, it's embarrassing and it makes me insecure, — concluded Kojiro, blushing, and bowed his head.

Ichiusai's looked very tenderly on his favorite student.

—Kojiro, I'm glad you told me. It's nothing to be ashamed of. I've been there myself. Why do you think my sword technique is called "the *Mugen*

Itto style" ("a single sword strike without illusions")? I haven't explained it to you yet, have I? Well, I'm going to tell you, and maybe it will help you get rid of this obsession of yours.

VII

Surely no one would be able to imagine that Ichiusai, old and dry as a dead tree, had lived through such an experience.

When he was young he was fighting, against a close friend, for a beautiful girl named Satoe. In terms of social position and appearance the friend outdid him by far, and there was nothing but the sword in mastery of which he outdid the friend. He was finally able to become the winner of his love because of his prestige as a swordsman.

After winning in the love battle despite the fact that he did not have many points in his favor a priori, and after obtaining the woman he longed for after many vicissitudes, Ichiusai put all his youthful ardor into loving his wife. His was a humble, adoring love that mixed equal parts awe and reverence.

He was convinced that the only thing he could offer his beautiful wife was his glory as a swordsman, so he plunged permanently into the way of the sword. Eventually he gained a great reputation as a swordsman and one day he met Yagyu Munenori at the mansion of Sakai Tadayo, a member of the *shogun's* council of elders.

Munenori was the shogunate's sword instructor. Although he was certain that he would not agree to face the owner of a simple village *dojo* like himself, he did not give up and dared to ask him to grant him the honor of fighting a single-strike duel with him. And Munenori, contrary to what might be expected, willingly accepted, picked up a wooden sword and went down into the garden.

Facing each other, the two wooden swords went towards the opponent just at the same time and struck each other on the shoulder.

"A draw" thought all those present, but suddenly Ichiusai jumped back, bowed and said:

—You have defeated me.

—Not at all, — answered Munenori, smiling, — I was impressed by your formidable mastery of the blade.

The next day, Ichiusai visited Yagyu's mansion and expressed his gratitude for the previous day's duel.

—In yesterday's duel, why did you say it was a draw? I know perfectly well that I was defeated.

At this question, an amicable expression appeared in Munenori's eyes, which he answered:

—What looked like a draw to everyone is better left as a draw. But, as expected, you have recognised it as your own defeat.

—Yes, with wooden swords it was a draw, but if they had been metal, I wouldn't be here.

—That's right. Now, I would have been seriously injured too... Ichiusai, your skill is neither superior nor inferior to mine. And yet, if we had used real swords, I would surely have defeated you. Do you know why?

—What is it?

—Even I find it curious to say so, but right now neither my body nor my soul is attached to anything. My spirit is serene, and therefore I can wield the sword with complete impartiality. But it seems to me that there is something in your soul that has you trapped. Isn't that the only thing that makes us different?

Munenori did not harass him to tell him what it was that imprisoned him, but Ichiusai knew clearly about it: it was his dear, beautiful wife Satoe.

From that moment on, Ichiusai decided that he had to get rid of his devotion to her, which he could not get out of his head for a moment, and he devoted himself to training day and night. But the glowing beauty of his wife, whom he saw from morning till night, clung to his pupils and did not leave him.

Several years passed, and one autumn morning Ichiusai was in the outside corridor looking out over the garden when he happened to turn his head and see her in front of the mirror, brushing her hair. Ichiusai stared at the silhouette on his wife's back when a look of dread, as if struck by lightning, came into his eyes. The reason was that among his wife's black hair he had discovered two or three white hairs.

—Satoe!

Ichiusai walked over to the side of his wife, who had turned around, and stared at her face as if seeing her for the first time. The fine wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, the tiny spots on her temples, the skin that was beginning to lose its luster... despite that he watched it to the point of exhaustion each day, he had not yet noticed her new face, which already reflected clearly the fleeting decline of a woman who was no longer in her prime. Ichiusai had his glowing beauty from when he was young engraved on his mind, and now he had been able to see her wife's true face with his own eyes for the first time.

—What happened to you? — Satoe asked in amazement.

—Nothing, you are as beautiful as ever, — that was all Ichiusai could answer.

Accustomed as she was to such praise, Satoe smiled and turned to the mirror again. Surely she did not realize that at that moment her husband had passed into another world.

That same day Ichiusai headed immediately for Yagyu's mansion. He asked Munenori for a new duel with a single blow but Munenori stared him in the face and answered:

—No, there's no competition possible. You've been training admirably. This time we'd surely end up in a draw.

Shortly thereafter Ichiusai added the two characters of *mugen* ("no illusions") in front of the *itto* ("a single sword strike") to give his technique a name, which gradually gained a reputation throughout the fiefdom.

VIII

In late July of the sixth year of the Kan'ei era (1629), an old man named Jubee Ichikawa visited Kojiro in Edo, as a representative of his relatives, accompanied by Mie and a servant named Uhei. His enemy, Tsukioka Yukinosuke, had changed his name to Hoshikawa Ikunosuke and was in Sunpu. He immediately notified the official registry of the shogunate and requested that he be granted an official license for his revenge.

Hearing the stories of his master, his story had struck a chord with him but Kojiro had no way of ridding himself of the obsession that nestled deep in his heart, and anxiety took hold of him. When he saw Mie again for the first time in three years, he stared at her in amazement. The beauty that had once been a cocoon had now fully matured and blossomed. Indeed, the intense melancholy that tinted her face with deeply chiseled features gave her the impression of being an otherworldly oddity in Kojiro's eyes.

Ichiusai saw the face of Kojiro, who visited him every day, and frowned.

—Kojiro!

—I'm sorry. I'm ashamed of myself. I am weak, — after exchanging these words, they both let out a deep sigh.

Kojiro was busy day and night preparing his departure to follow the procedure for his revenge, but he took some time out and went to the Hie shrine to say some heartfelt prayers.

But when he returned home and saw Mie's face and smelled her perfume, all his determination vanished like smoke. And finally the day came to leave for Sunpu. There, at the official request of the Owari fiefdom,

Tsukioka Yukinosuke was already in the custody of Inspector Noda Yinoshin. Of course by now Yukinosuke no longer felt like running and hiding, and since Noda himself was aware of the situation, his restriction of movement was not too strict either.

All the clansmen who were familiar with Yukinosuke's *Mineuchi Fusetsu* ("The Non-Lethal Sword") technique had a vested interest, as expected, in whether or not Yukinosuke would kill his opponent in this duel. No doubt his rival would wield a sword willing to kill. What could a non-lethal sword do in the face of that?

—This will be a very interesting show, — announced advisor Saegusa Izunokami to Tadanaga. It was he who had included this revenge as the third match in the duel-to-the-death tournament to be held inside Sunpu Castle on September twenty-fourth.

—I have heard that the young Kurokawa Kojiro is an expert from the Ichiusai *dojo*. Are you sure Tsukioka can bring him down with the back of the sword?

—This duel is different from the others. I think perhaps Yukinosuke will trade his non-lethal sword for a deadly attack.

—In any case, the main thing in a duel with real swords is the intention to kill, so Yukinosuke is at a disadvantage...

—You're right.

Kojiro and his companions arrived at an inn in the Hiraya district of Sunpu five days before the duel. The melancholy expressed on Mie's face grew as the day approached. Kojiro did not know what the reason was, but even now his mind was completely overwhelmed by the worldly desires from which he could not free himself. At midnight he saw how Mie was secretly writing what appeared to be a letter and could no longer hold it. He made sure that Mie had fallen asleep, stole the writing from her and read it. The contents felt as if lightning had passed through him. Every character in that letter to Yukinosuke was imbued with the love of the sad Mie: "I beg you not to kill Kojiro. If Kojiro were to die, we would have to accept another man to become the successor to the Kurokawa family. If you have any compassion for my heart, which desires nothing more than to become your wife no matter what, do not kill Kojiro." The letter made it clear to Kojiro that Mie's heart belonged entirely to someone else. "Maybe those two are virtually married already," he thought.

His deep despair instantly turned to intense anger. Moreover, the fact that Mie's writing seemed convinced that Kojiro's own life was entirely in Yukinosuke's hands hurt him in the last vestiges of dignity that remained. And so it was that his love for Mie and his respect for Yukinosuke were transformed into a violent fighting spirit.

If Ichiusai had seen his face the next morning, he would surely have shouted, "You did it, Kojiro!". Mie's figure was as important as a pebble in the gutter to Kojiro.

Two days later, as he strode into the dueling grounds within Sunpu Castle with his blade, a murderous impetus glowed persistently like a star in Kojiro's eyes.

Yukinosuke glanced at him silently and drew his weapon. Although it did not bear the name of the forger, it was an excellent sword, thin and with a straight blade, the curvature was extremely shallow and at first glance it looked like a double-edged sword, which he wielded firmly in the eyes of his rival. As soon as he took up his stance, Watanabe Kenmotsu and Murakami San'emon, who were acting as referees, let out a shout of surprise, as if they had come to an agreement. Yukinosuke had turned the back of his sword on his opponent.

Even if Mie had not asked him not to kill Kojiro, he had no intention of doing so himself. So far, however, all his rivals had clearly been one step below him, but perhaps Kojiro, in terms of technique, was on the same level. At the last moment, in the decisive blow, when he had to turn the blade around, perhaps he could take his life.

"All right, in that case, I'll fight from the start with the back of my *katana*", decided Yukinosuke.

Surprisingly, the duel lasted only a short time. The fact that he turned the back of his blade on him multiplied the fury of Kojiro, who threw himself at him like a bolt of lightning.

Yukinosuke dodged his blade a couple of times and, as he intercepted Kojiro's last murderous attack, he stepped forward and dealt the Toda School *ukifune* blow.

—Grrr..

—Ah!

They both screamed at the same time.

The one standing in front of his opponent prostrate on the ground was Yukinosuke, bloodied *katana* in hand and apparently doubting what his eyes saw. Because of his training and against his own will, the blade he wielded had turned at the last moment, and thus had cut his opponent down with the edge.

—Kojiro, hold on! — Yukinosuke shouted as he embraced Kojiro, while hearing a voice in the corner of his head screaming that he had lost Mie. But Kojiro had already stopped breathing. Amidst the muffled whispers of stupefaction in the courtyard over the victor's inexplicable behavior, the strange sobs of Yukinosuke echoed through the air.

GAMAKENPO

(«Toad fencing»)

I

It was planned that in the fourth match of the duel-to-the-death tournament that took place in the presence of Tadanaga, the lord of the castle, in the south courtyard of the interior of Sunpu Castle, on the twenty-fourth of September of the sixth year of the Kan'ei era, the instructor in the handling of the spear of Suruga fief, Sasahara Shuzaburo, and the wandering assassin Kutsuki Gannosuke would face each other.

However, aside from the one who was in command on the day — the advisor to the *daimyo* Saegusa Izunokami — no one else was certain that the duel would go as planned. In other words, no one could predict whether Kutsuki Gannosuke would actually show up at the combat site. As for Sasahara Shuzaburo, he was a vassal of the fief and of course he was at the tournament venue very early on, as he had been looking forward to this duel from the very beginning.

On the other hand, Kutsuki's whereabouts were unknown. It was rumored that he was hiding in a cave on Mount Fuji and that from time to time he would appear around the castle town like a gale, but this was just talk. Sasahara had hung posters challenging Kutsuki throughout the fief, and those posters had even included clarification from the fief government that they were independent.

Fearful of the outcome of the duel, no further injury would be inflicted on Kutsuki's body. Even so, he was not at all sure that Kutsuki, who had already killed up to three famous swordsmen in the city, would trust the poster and come forward. Consequently, the fourth duel was declared to begin and from the curtain on the east side Sasahara Shuzaburo appeared in the enclosure after being summoned, holding in his hand his prized and famous spear, the "Silver Serpent". Then the other opponent was summoned and suddenly the atmosphere was filled with unusual expectation.

—And on the west side, the swordsman Kutsuki Gannosuke.

For a few moments no one answered the call. The purified sand in the enclosure reflected the rays of the sun and an uneasy tension spread through the place.

But in response to the second call, from among the group of low-ranking rural samurai from neighboring villages and merchants who were allowed

to carry swords, a man leapt up from the west side. Like a frog leaping from the bushes, he entered the compound and introduced himself in a low, hoarse voice:

—Kutsuki Gannosuke, present.

—Oh, he's come!

—But what is that, a toad?

—What audacity...

As the commotion of the crowd swept through the room like a gust of wind, the two swordsmen were already facing each other in the center of the dueling room.

Whereas Shuzaburo was a handsome, tall, white-skinned man, Gannosuke had a deformed, plump body with extremely short legs and a dark, purplish complexion, with eyes noticeably separated from one another, a flattened nose and a large, protruding mouth beneath it. As his nickname indicated, he certainly had something reminiscent of a toad.

The eyes of all onlookers, focused on Gannosuke, clearly showed disgust and, above all — panic.

Surely the vast majority of those present wished for Gannosuke's defeat.

At the same time, however, the vast majority also harbored the fear that he might be victorious. Such was the fear of the people of the city around Sunpu Castle of the Gannosuke's "toad fencing".

Until three years ago, few people knew his name. At first it was only known that he was the orphaned son of a *ronin* whose name was unknown and whose lineage was unclear. Two years ago, since the celebration of the *Kabuto-nage* ("Helmet throwing") of the Funaki *dojo*, he had become the target of strange gossip and the following year, again, after the night of the *Kabuto-nage*, he earned everyone's fear and hatred for being an extremely ruthless swordsman.

Kabuto-nage was a unique martial arts event held every 5th of May at the *dojo* of Funaki Ichidensai, acclaimed in the city of Sunpu for his swordplay since the Keiko era (1596-1615). All details are carefully explained in the "*Book of the traditions of the Funaki family*" and in "*The method of Kabuto-nage*".

In short, however, it differs from the more usual *kabuto-wari* ("helmet breaker") in that a fixed helmet is cut down, while in *kabuto-nage* the helmet is thrown from the side and must be cut in half just as it passes in front of your eyes. It goes without saying that this requires extraordinary strength and great speed.

In the *Kabuto-nage* of each year there was at most one person who could

cut the helmet thrown at him in two. And once there was not even one person who aspired to perform such a feat.

In the *Kabuto-nage* of May 5th of the fourth year of the Kan'ei era (1627), considerable interest arose among the young vassals of the fief and the other disciples of Funaki, since it was conjectured that perhaps the one who demonstrated a splendid skill in that *Kabuto-nage* would become the successor of Ichidensai and future husband of his daughter Chika. But this is not to say that Ichidensai showed any sign in particular that would give away such intention. It was simply that Ichidensai's state of health and the exceptional beauty of Chika, who was already of marriageable age, contributed to making such an event seem possible, with no room for error. With no doubt this gave wings to the hearts of young samurai.

There were as many as three people who tried to cut the helmet, namely: fiefdom vassal Saida Sonosuke, fellow vassal Kuwaki Juzo, and *ronin* Kurakawa Kizaemon.

Among them, the favourite and the one with more chances of winning was Saida Sonosuke, who was said to be the most capable disciple of the Funaki *dojo*, and who had the experience of having already managed to make a cut of more than ten centimetres in the helmet thrown to him the previous year.

Both Kuwaki and Kurakawa were also prominent swordsmen in the Funaki *dojo*, and it was said that in preparation for that day they had been practicing kabuto-wari non-stop until they fell apart.

But then a fourth candidate came forward. It is not necessarily unusual for a new candidate to suddenly appear with a chance of winning. What surprised and stunned everyone, however, was that this fourth candidate was Kutsuki Gannosuke, who had been living at the Funaki *dojo* as a servant for more than ten years, and in the eyes of all the disciples was nothing more than a servant.

Gannosuke was the son of a *ronin* who was found dead in the street. Funaki Ichidensai took care of the orphan and brought him to the *dojo*. Since he was a child, because of his unpleasant appearance and his arrogant attitude that did not match his position, no one had any affection for him, not even in the *dojo*, but he performed all the tasks Ichidensai commanded him with a great sense of responsibility.

If Ichidensai protected Gannosuke it was because he sensed that he possessed a natural talent for the blade. Because of his lower social status, Gannosuke could not participate in official training, but gradually his unique and fearsome swordsmanship gained notoriety among his fellow disciples. Occasionally, however, this or that disciple would duel with

Gannosuke, and at the last moment, when Kutsuki got cornered, he would be so bitter that the brutality of his sword earned the dislike of the disciples, and there were many who swore never to fight him again. After Gannosuke expressed his desire to participate in the "*Kabuto-nage*", Ichidensai was perplexed because the disciples were opposed to it head on with a mixture of envy and indignation.

—That lout... But what does he think, that he has so much skill? Is he not aware of his limitations?

But what was really behind these unpleasant words was something even more insulting: "Has he fallen in love with Chika, with that toad-like face of his?"

However, it had been the custom for many years that one could not refuse anyone who wished to participate in "*Kabuto-nage*", even if it was an anonymous *ronin* who was passing through. After some thought, Ichidensai finally allowed Gannosuke to participate.

When the master had informed him of his decision, Gannosuke's bruised face suddenly glowed with an expression of joy that he had never shown before. Borrowing the ill-intentioned expression of one of the disciples, he actually expressed his joy "with a guttural sound, like a toad croaking at the sight of clouds".

II

The next morning Gannosuke's toad face, which had recently shone with joy, underwent a dramatic change and became a face of alarm and distress. Despair, fury, and humiliation were all over his face, adding to his already complex and mysterious features, and turning the stomach of those who saw him, while a sinister premonition sent shivers down their spine.

What prompted such an overnight transformation was the conversation between Chika and her father Ichidensai that Gannosuke overheard the previous night, when he was hiding in the recess beneath the floor of Chika's room.

For some time now, Gannosuke had been in the habit of hiding under the floor of Chika's room each night and listening to her trivial soliloquies, or the faint sounds of fabric rubbing as Chika prepared her bed, changed her clothes, went to bed, and finally fell asleep. Even after Chika had fallen soundly asleep, Gannosuke would often squat there for a long time, ecstatic at the thought of the tender body of his beautiful love lying on his head. "Same as a toad", he would sometimes say to himself with a bitter

smile over his crouching figure in the darkness, but he could no longer shake off his dubious habit.

That night Gannosuke was crouched as usual under the floor and happened to overhear the conversation between Chika and the master. He would have been happier if he had not heard those words; but once heard, they stuck in his mind and he could never forget those cruel comments.

—Father, is it true that you have allowed Gannosuke to participate in the next *Kabuto-nage*? — Chika asked with a clear hint of discontent in her voice.

—It is by tradition we can't refuse anyone.

—Is it true that the rumor is that whoever succeeds in cutting the helmet will become my future husband?

—I don't remember saying such a thing. Anyway, there are many young people who aspire to be your husband, and whatever criteria we use to choose him, it will surely sow bitterness. As for me, if Saida Sonosuke were to succeed, I think we'd do well to choose him under that pretext. Do you dislike Sonosuke?

—No... well... if it's Sonosuke...

—He's a splendid young man, you have nothing to complain about.

—Yes, but...

—Both Kuwaki and Kurakawa are also very skilled, but don't worry, they won't outdo Saida.

—Yes, but what if that Gannosuke... What?

—It's true, if there's anyone who can defeat Saida, it's Gannosuke.

—Well, Gannosuke disgusts me, — replied Chika, raising her voice, — Did Gannosuke happen to show more skill than Sonosuke? I am disgusted by that toad-like man with the flattened nose and crooked legs.

—Ha-ha-ha. I'm not saying I'm going to accept Gannosuke as a son-in-law either. And even if it comes to the worst, you'll see what we'll do with him, so don't worry.

Gannosuke's entire body shook violently in his hiding place and a few sobs echoed down his throat.

He certainly had a flat, crushed nose, and his short legs were crooked, just as she had said. He had heard insults of all sorts being hurled at him behind his back, and often he was teased to his own face as well. Now, as he heard it from the mouth of his longed-for Chika, to whom he had secretly given his body and soul for more than ten years, the feeling of humiliation pierced him to the core like a raging spiral, tearing at his flesh and excising his soul. Likewise, the way Chika screamed when she said

she was disgusted, full of disgust and as if he was going to vomit at any moment, hit him like a burning iron bar and crushed his morale.

Gannosuke, who had seemed to stagger around like a soul in distress all day, appeared the next day — the day of the *Kabuto-nage* — in the back garden of the *dojo*, where the ceremony was to take place, with an atrociously fierce, annoying countenance.

The *Kabuto-nage* martial arts tournament began at time of the snake — ten o'clock in the morning. Throwing a heavy helmet skilfully after measuring one's breath was no easy task. Ichidensai himself did it from an elevated platform. On a wooden platform, the helmets he picked were lined up and hurled with the shouts of "Hey!" to the swordsmen waiting in front of him; they had to swing their swords and cut the helmet off just as it passed in front of their eyes.

First Kuwaki came out and barely scratched the top of the helmet. Then *ronin* Kurakawa tried, making only a six-centimeter incision.

Then came the confident favourite, Saida Sonosuke, who took his rightful place. The beauty of his pale, somewhat rosy cheeks and straight nose was evident upon sight. The white, shapely calves that peeked out from under the *hakama* pants he wore on his sleeves were stiff and showed the tension that overflowed through his body.

—Hey! — Ichidensai shouted as he threw the helmet.

—Ta! — Saida shouted and tore the helmet in half. Seeing it on the ground, Sonosuke smiled broadly. Chika's face, who was watching everything from the corridor overlooking the garden, suddenly flashed a cheerful smile as well.

—Magnificent!

—I expected nothing less from Saida.

—He's done it!

Amidst the unquiet cries of admiration from the crowd, a taciturn Kutsuki Gannosuke took his place in Sonosuke's place. As soon as people saw that ungraceful figure, at the opposite end of Sonosuke's, they began to laugh at him.

In the eyes of Ichidensai, however, who had picked up the last helmet and was preparing to throw it, there was a look of astonishment.

"He can do it. I did not think it would go this far."

Ichidensai involuntarily shook the hand that held the helmet, but concentrated.

—Feh, — he said quietly before throwing the helmet.

There was a loud metallic noise.

The helmet was lying on the ground after the swift blow from the still taciturn Gannosuke's sword, but the crack was not even halfway through the helmet.

Suddenly there was mocking laughter again, and among it a voice that said —It's over.

It was the voice of Ichidensai, speaking as he wiped the sweat from his forehead. Meanwhile Gannosuke had knelt and was examining the helmet. —Wait a minute! — he shouted in a strange voice. His eyes were glowing as if on fire, and his lips were twitching in spasms. — I ask you to repeat this helmet throwing.

—What?! — exclaimed Ichidensai and glared at Gannosuke as the ribbon that had kept his kimono sleeves rolled up was untied, but his face was troubled.

—Master, Gannosuke is not satisfied with the throw.

—Why?

—For one thing, the cry you used to warn of the launch was particularly low and it was not well-synchronized with the throw. Secondly, it seems as if you deliberately threw it so that the point at which the helmet crossed my sword was particularly low. Having explained to you in detail the two reasons why I sense a method of favoritism, I reiterate my desire that you throw the helmet back to me.

—You suggest that my throwing was not like the others?

Gannosuke looked at Ichidensai, who was biting his lip, and answered clearly without hesitation.

—That is correct. The master teacher himself more than anyone should be aware of that.

—How rude! How do you address the master like that, Kutsuki?

Withdraw! — a disciple shouted.

—How do you put on such airs when you're just a servant?

—Imbecile! — added another.

Ichidensai silenced his enraged disciples with a wave of his hand, brushed aside the aggressive tone he had been employing thus far and addressed Gannosuke with softer words.

—Gannosuke, I've raised you since you were a child, you're like a son of mine, so to speak. How can you accuse me of favoritism like that? The thing is simply that I'm getting older, and no longer have the same strength in my arms as I once did. This *Kabuto-nage* was to be the last. I was thinking of entrusting it to someone else as of next year. Unlike other years, this time I had to make four pitches, and in the last one I was

perhaps already a little short of breath, which is just a sign of my advanced age. You can't repeat the throwing as there is no such custom.

—Even so, master...

—Gannosuke, you're forcing me to argue, so listen. Even if the helmet-throwing I did with you was out of sync and flew a little lower, if you had been skilled enough, you should have been able to cut it off. Do you think that on the battlefield the enemy's helmet will fly past your eyes when it suits you and at just the right height? It is very unpleseant that you answer so rudely without being aware of the inexperience of your own abilities or the position you hold, Gannosuke.

Gannosuke stared at Ichidensai as he spoke, then looked down at the floor. Startled, his shoulders shook and his response was surprisingly docile.

—Master, I ask your forgiveness. Certainly if I had had the necessary skill, no matter what the throw, I should have been able to break through the helmet without trouble. Your lesson has touched me deeply.

Like a frog that is going to jump over a prey, he stood up, tiptoed and looked for Chika's figure in the corridor overlooking the garden. He caught her glance above the heads of the attendants, but saw that she quickly hid behind them, so Gannosuke bowed his head, said goodbye to Ichidensai, and left the place in silence. No one noticed that the corners of his lips were cut off with bites from his own teeth, and the red blood fell to his chin.

That same night Gannosuke disappeared from the Funaki *dojo*.

III

In the time of the greatest aroma of the chrysanthemums, Saida Sonosuke took Chika as her wife. As an assistant instructor at the Funaki *dojo* she actually took over everything on Ichidensai's behalf.

Everyone had already forgotten about Gannosuke. But just then a rumor came out of nowhere that Gannosuke, whose whereabouts were unknown at the time, was seen secluded in a cave on Mount Fuji. Sometimes, woodcutters who frequented the area at the foot of Mount Fuji would meet a sinister man there "who looked like a hybrid between a toad and a turtle". No one dared say so, but everyone thought it was him.

And indeed it was none other than Gannosuke. It is not known what sort of life he had been leading until then, but his once obese body had thinned considerably and a rectangular torso rose above his invariably short legs. His face was still dirty, with a flattened nose and crowned by a tangle of

hair. He truly looked worthy of the fruit of the union between an old tortoise and a sick toad.

From autumn to winter, Gannosuke spent his days in the cold inside caves. In particular, he would take refuge in a deep, narrow, shallow cave — barely a foot high — and inside he would wield his sword and utter piercing cries. He stretched his left leg back and raised his right knee, and as if he wanted to cover that knee with his torso he bent down and in that grotesque position drew and held his sword. And within that cave, which was narrow even when Gannosuke was thus crouched, his sword flashed freely and moved about at will, as if ignoring the stone walls around it. —Heh, heh, heh. In this position I look just like a toad. I'm a toad, and I'm fine with it. I'm an ugly toad. Just like Chika said. But... I'll show you what this toad's sword can do, damn it! — he grumbled persistently.

On days when the wind was so strong that it blew dirt and heavy pebbles off the side of Mount Fuji, Gannosuke would come out of his cave and wield his wooden blade. With it he brought down, one after the other, all the pebbles that had been flying from every possible direction and angle. Gannosuke's body flexed up and down at a dizzying speed and precisely ablated the flying pebbles, no matter where they came from.

The bitter experience he suffered when that helmet was deliberately thrown too low and he missed the blow had taught him something important: that in case of cutting an object that is below the center of gravity, the power of the sword decreases considerably the lower that object is.

Of course, it is not that he understood perfectly the concept of the center of gravity. He simply thought of the central point of his body and called it "the core".

So he began to train himself to make the core of his own body, that is, his center of gravity, move freely up and down, or in other words, to make his whole body instantly elastic.

Seen from this perspective, it was extremely advantageous to fight with the body glued to the ground. To begin with, it had the effect of weakening the power of the opponent's sword when he attacked from the usual position. Secondly, it offered the possibility of attacking the opponent in the lower part of the body, which is the most unprotected.

Gannosuke devoted all his energies to perfecting his swordplay from that position, which he called *Gamakenpo* ("Toad Fencing"). Days and nights followed in which he was possessed and driven mad by the sword.

Although he forgot everything and concentrated only on his efforts with

the sword, sometimes, when he was exhausted and fell asleep inside the cave, Chika would suddenly appear in his dreams. The young blood that ran through their veins, overflowing with emotions, expelled fire and burned, and in the midst of those flames Saida Sonosuke embraced Chika and loosened her *obi*, and she arched back melancholically her white skin. In those moments, Gannosuke bellowed like a beast, he'd get up all of a sudden, come out of the cave and start wielding his wooden sword and run across the moor until dawn.

—Chika! Chika! — he cried out in desolation and, under the glare of the winter moon that looked like a cruel, sharp sickle, the tears that fell down his cheeks glowed and froze between his beards.

Since he did not have access to decent food, because of the dry, snow-hardened herbs he used to eat, he would occasionally gag and a bitter juice would rise from his stomach into his throat.

Since he did not have a drop of sake to celebrate the first day of the fifth year of the Kan'ei era (1628), Gannosuke received the new year like any other day, exhausted and prostrate inside the cave.

But in the early hours of the morning, between sleep and wakefulness, a suspicious silhouette suddenly appeared to him, approaching where he laid.

He drew almost unconsciously the sword he was holding. He slashed horizontally followed by a vertical downward stroke and felt a reaction, but in the midst of the black darkness it was impossible for him to distinguish what sort of opponent it was.

Gannosuke stared for a long time and looked around, sword in hand. The interior of the cavern became permeated with the stench of fresh blood and when it finally disappeared in the wind, Gannosuke wiped the edge of his sword, leaned against the cave wall and fell asleep as if nothing had happened.

When he awoke to the light of dawn, he discovered that at the entrance to the cave laid a huge mountain wolf: the two front legs were cut horizontally and separated from the body, the tip of the snout had been severed at the front and split in two.

Something similar to a smile formed on Gannosuke's face.

When he went outside, passing over the wolf's carcass, snowflakes were falling. He was standing in front of the cave watching the snow when his body suddenly came forward and looked as if it was going to lie down, but then he extended the sword he was carrying in his right hand and divided into two, about ten centimetres from the ground, a falling snowflake as

small as a poppy seed. Again a shadow of a smile fell on his face. He stepped on the snow and disappeared in a southerly direction.

The next day, in the evening, Saida Sonosuke was murdered, by whom — no one knew, on the corner of Anzai-cho in the city of Sunpu Castle, as he returned from a New Year's visit.

Everyone was astonished that someone could have murdered Sonosuke, so physically gifted, even if it was through an attack in the middle of the night. But what horrified all who came to the scene was the shocking state of his body: after cutting off both legs just below the knee with a clean cut, his throat had been slashed through with the blade, causing his death. And to top it all off, with cold blood, they had sliced off his nose.

People wondered, as a chill ran down their backs, what sort of person would be capable of hurting and killing a man like Sonosuke so mercilessly. Naturally, no one there remembered Gannosuke anymore, who had not been heard from in a long time.

The only person who, upon hearing the details of what happened, thought of Gannosuke as a possible culprit was Funaki Ichidensai, but he kept it to himself and told no one.

The assailant acted very quickly, snatching the *katana* from Saida Sonosuke's waist and soaking up the blood that poured from his body. Despite being attacked by a villain, Sonosuke fought to the death, for which the reputation of the family grew. When Chika returned to the Funaki *dojo*, however, she spent a few agonizing days, and it goes without saying what she expected.

IV

May 5th arrived again on day of *Kabuto-nage*.

The melancholic Chika, who had just lost her husband, looked distracted and was thus even more suggestive. Her tenderly afflicted expression tore the hearts of the young samurai.

"Perhaps, if I succeed in demonstrating my magnificent abilities at this year's *Kabuto-nage*, I will be able to make Chika, a beautiful and refined woman, my own" — was perhaps the hope that stimulated the young people who were aware of their abilities, for the number of candidates who wished to participate in this year's *Kabuto-nage* tournament had reached an unprecedented six.

Ichidensai took over the inspection duties and handed over the role of helmet thrower to Sasahara Gonpachiro, known throughout the fief as a master of the *Itto* ("One Sword Strike") style.

On the appointed day, the young swordsmen who had signed up, carried away by Chika's tender beauty and overestimated their abilities, failed one after another. Only one barely managed to break the helmet: *ronin* Kurakawa Kizaemon, who had failed miserably the previous year by breaking the helmet by only about six centimeters.

—All right, you've been training hard! — Ichidensai praised Kurakawa with a smile, but just then a ragged man appeared out of nowhere and pushed his way through the crowd and took a leap.

—Oh, it's Kutsuki! — the audience exclaimed in surprise.

Gannosuke walked towards Ichidensai and prostrated himself before him.

—Master, you'll punish me later for running away without warning. Now I ask you to test Gannosuke's ability again, which you branded as immature, — he declared so firmly that it was impossible to refuse.

Silence fell over the place for a few moments.

Finally, Ichidensai responded with an expression of immense displeasure, as if wanting to get rid of Kutsuki.

—I grant you permission. Try it, — that was all he replied, guided by his irrepressible desire as a swordsman to witness with his own eyes the secrets of the new technique this strange wizard had perfected, as his menacing firmness suggested, and setting aside all other considerations. Gannosuke took his position.

—Sasahara, I will replace you.

Ichidensai stepped onto the launch pad to replace Gonpachiro. His gestures were unusually violent. As soon as he picked up the helmet he threw it at Gannosuke suddenly, out of sync, aiming at his knees with intent to injure him.

Even for someone who has the sword ready and is in the normal position it is impossible to cut a helmet thrown in that way before it falls to the ground. The moment everyone in the room had this same feeling, Gannosuke recoiled like a bird in flight and threw his body forward as if to lie down.

He tore the helmet in half spectacularly from about six inches high and then dropped it to the ground. Gannosuke looked at the stunned faces of the spectators, who had been left breathless, then turned his gaze to Chika, who stood in the corridor overlooking the garden.

—Honorable Miss Chika, last year Saida broke his helmet in two and became your husband, right? On this occasion, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?

Chika gave a heart-rending cry and left. Then Ichidensai, frightened and wide-eyed, began to gasp for air.

—Rude boy! You are so conceited, there is no connection between the throwing of helmets and Chika's choice of husband. Withdraw!

After these words, Kurakawa Kizaemon stepped forward with a flushed face.

—Kutsuki, such arrogant remarks are unforgivable. You are not the only one who has broken a helmet today. I have broken one admirably myself.

—He he. That's right, Kurakawa, you broke it, too. But there are ways and means of breaking a helmet. You couldn't break a helmet the way it was thrown at me.

—You're being rude!

—If you wish, we can face each other right here and get rid of any doubts about who is the best, — Gannosuke's voice was calm from start to finish, but it contained a distinctly dismissive tone.

—I wish. Come here!

In an instant, in the midst of the crowd that had pulled away to make room for him, Kurakawa Kizaemon rolled up his *hakama*.

Gannosuke fixed his piercing gaze for a few moments on Chika, who watched with a frightened face from behind the crowd, and then moved on to Kurakawa.

—He, he, he. Kurakawa, your legs are beautiful, so thin and slender. Mine, on the other hand, are ugly and crooked like those of a frog. Besides, your nose describes a perfect straight line, while mine is squashed like a toad's. But Kurokawa, in the way of the sword, forgive me for saying so, you are not on my level.

—Shut up, servant!

Kurakawa brandished his *katana* above his head and brought it down in a vertical strike, but just then Gannosuke crawled away with his body hitting the ground. The tip of Kurakawa's blade tore the air futilely. His upper body moved forward, at which point Gannosuke took advantage of a low, horizontal cut about a foot off the ground.

He had severed both legs with a clean cut just below the knees.

—Did you see it? It's toad fencing! — Gannosuke shouted as Kurakawa collapsed and, almost at the same time, with the same sword movement, he cut off his nose with a diagonal cut.

—You, the murderer of Saida Sonosuke, stay put! — Ichidensai proclaimed as he threw a dagger at him with his right hand like a pebble. Gannosuke easily repelled the dagger with the back of his *katana*. The

expression on his face changed dramatically to a sinister, angry look, and then he let out a grunt:

—Ichidensai, with those senile arms you can't kill Gannosuke. It would be too easy for me to kill you, but in gratitude for feeding me for more than ten years, I will spare your life. Listen, Chika. If you leave Gannosuke aside and marry any other man, whoever he is, I'll take care of him. Did you hear that, Chika? I'll cut off that man's nose, I'll cut off his legs and he'll stop breathing.

—Hey, you, wait!

—Kutsuki, you are unforgivable!

When Ichidensai and Gonpachiro came to their senses after recovering from their bewilderment at what had happened, they drew their swords and rushed towards Gannosuke, but then he made a strange leap, like a toad, made his way through the crowd, left the residence and vanished.

V

The fearsome toad-fencing of Gannosuke, which had brought down Kurakawa Kizaemon with a single blow after the helmet they had thrown at him had been split in two, caused fear to spread among the population. In light of the brutal technique with which he had defeated Kizaemon, there was no longer any doubt that Gannosuke had also been responsible for the murder of Saida Sonosuke.

Whoever took Chika as his wife would have to be prepared to live constantly under the threat of that vindictive, incomparable, and ghostly swordsman.

Even if her suitors were drawn to the beauty of Chika, they obviously could not help but waver at the risk of facing such danger. After that, all of the young men who had hitherto passionately desired Chika showed no further interest, with one exception: Sasahara Gonpachiro.

He had been invited that day and had seen Chika for the first time, but he had been completely taken by her delicate fragrance and her frightened pupils. Also, the fact that Gannosuke had outwitted them and managed to flee without being caught had hurt his pride as a swordsman considerably.

—But who the hell is this Gannosuke? What is this toad fencing?

After that, Gonpachiro used to visit the Funaki *dojo* frequently to comfort Chika and encourage Ichidensai. It was natural for Ichidensai to conclude that Gonpachiro was the only man he could trust with Chika.

After the first anniversary of Sonosuke's death, Chika married Gonpachiro.

—This won't end well.

—The toad is sure to attack Sasahara.

Such was the talk of the people, in which a certain touch of envy was mixed.

From the beginning, Gonpachiro had everything ready.

He took every precaution every day and prepared for Gannosuke's attack, who did not know when it might come.

He avoided any nighttime outings at all costs, and doubled the security of the estate. Perhaps that was why, for a time, the expected Gannosuke showed no sign of life and there were some quiet days. But, after a while, suspicious rumors began to be whispered here and there again.

—I saw Gannosuke outside the city!

In the early hours of the morning there was a toad-like man lurking around Sasahara's house!

And the one who showed the most dread at these rumors was Chika.

—Will we be safe? It seems Gannosuke is on the prowl again, and he's after you...

Her words made him deeply uncertain, but when Chika clung to him, Gonpachiro was overcome by a love for his wife that made him proclaim vehemently:

—Even if that guy did show up again, that kind of toad is no match for me, a prestigious expert in the *Itto* style.

Despite these statements by Gonpachiro, Chika's fears were increasing day by day. After some time, when a loud noise was heard one night, Chika woke up suddenly, shaking, and hugged Gonpachiro tightly.

—The toad... the toad has come! — she shouted frantically.

Chika's neck was almost transparent and her veins were blue, and her delicate legs were trembling as she inserted them between Gonpachiro's thighs.

Gonpachiro tried to calm her in his arms as if cradling a baby, and stroked her tenderly all over his body. After this, as if to confirm once again the bond between the two, they made passionate love again.

As he looked at Chika's glowing face, his eyes closed and she lay utterly exhausted in his arms, Gonpachiro's blood began to boil with a feeling of boundless rage against Gannosuke, as he thought of how much he had made his dear, sweet wife suffer thus far.

"It's all right, you bloody toad. I am not going to wait around for you to show up. I'll come and get you and take your life."

Gonpachiro went to visit his cousin Sasahara Shuzaburo for advice.

Shuzaburo was the instructor of *sojutsu* ("spear handling") in the Suruga

fief. He had learned to wield the spear from Nakamura Ichiemon Naomasa, the founder of the Nakamura faction that propagated the teachings of the Hozoin school of *sojutsu*, and he was praised for his exquisite skill.

—I've heard of this Gannosuke, and as far as I know he's not a not-so-easy rival, — after saying this, he asked Gonpachiro to explain in detail the technique Gannosuke used on the day of the *Kabuto-nage* and then asked him several questions.

—That Gannosuke has completely mastered the movement of his blade tip, eh? When I was learning the techniques of the sword and the spear, I also learned the specific use of the blade depending on the flexibility of the body, but I understood something important and that is why I finally chose the spear. In a confrontation with a sword, the space in which you could effectively injure your opponent was extremely small: from the top of your head to above your knees; there was barely a space of one meter.

In contrast, the range you could reach when you went to your opponent to pierce him with a spear, from head to foot, was more than two meters. Gannosuke had developed a particular secret technique that allowed him to increase his range by shifting the center of gravity of his supple body. Shuzaburo, having mastered the lance technique, which originally allowed him to circumvent such a difficulty, was on a path that made it easy for him to deliver a deadly blow to any enemy, whether on horseback or prostrate on the ground.

—Someone who only uses a sword can't defeat that toad. He could only do it with a spear. That is the only solution, — Shizaburo assured.

Although Gonpachiro had told Chika that the prestige of the Itto school would not allow him to be defeated, from that day on he had not stopped thinking about how he would be able to cope with the fencing of that Gannosuke's toad, who until then was a complete stranger to him. As he listened to the words of his cousin Shuzaburo, Gonpachiro began to understand and nod his head.

—Would you accept me as your disciple?

—To learn how to handle the spear?

In other words, he was going to temporarily give up the secret techniques of the highest level and again adopt the role of a disciple. Shuzaburo was a bit surprised, but he was impressed by the extraordinary and intense fighting spirit that Gannosuke had awakened in Gonpachiro.

—It's fine. As for you, I have almost nothing new to teach you, if only how to handle the spear... — Shuzaburo nodded.

For three months, Gonpachiro attended Shuzaburo's *dojo*. Both the master

and the student were colleagues who had reached the highest level, so the progress was spectacular.

—Gonpachiro, no need to say anything about your sword, but if you were to reach such a high level with the spear, then there would be no more fearsome opponent than you, — Shuzaburo said one day as he held the spear upright, and Gonpachiro smiled as if to say:

"That's what I think!"

During those three months there were several changes in Gonpachiro's life. Ichidensai died and he inherited his *dojo*. Also, the *Kabuto-nage* that year was not held, as it coincided with Ichidensai's illness. Looking back at the calamitous events of the previous year, everyone was glad that it had been cancelled.

VI

Although Gonpachiro never let his guard down and was always alert even when he decided of his own accord to go in search of Gannosuke, the attack came at the most unexpected time and place.

It was on the first day of July, the morning of the visit of all the vassals to the castle, that Gonpachiro and the young servant Sasuke, who carried the spear for him, went around Fudanotsuji-cho, which communicated with Terashita-chu through the main entrance to the castle.

—Hiee! — there was a sharp, whistling voice just behind Gonpachiro. Gonpachiro stopped short and Sasuke's head rolled to the ground.

—Ah!

Gonpachiro stepped back to the right and in his hand he was already wielding his sword, but Gannosuke was approaching him, his body slumped over the ground like a toad.

The decapitated body of Sasuke laid barely six feet away, still wielding the spear. But it was utterly impossible to get hold of. To alter one's body posture in the slightest would mean becoming a victim of the enemy's blade on the spot.

"Damn it!"

Gonpachiro gnashed his teeth in rage when he realised that all his training with the spear had come to nothing, but at this point he had no choice but to fight against his rival's diabolic sword using the secret technique of the *Itto* style.

Gannosuke's body continued to advance, little by little.

Following his movements, Gonpachiro in turn retreated, little by little.

Gonpachiro had assumed that the enemy's attack would be directed at his legs, so he had adopted a low-sword attack position, but no matter how impatient he got, he could not find the right moment to inflict an attack on an enemy that was crawling on the ground, more than a foot below him. One step back, two steps... Gonpachiro was gradually being cornered. When he felt the edge of the adobe wall at his left he prepared to go on the offensive even at the risk of his life, but just then the blade of Gannosuke rose in a flash.

—Uuh!

Gonpachiro's face squirted with fresh blood and he staggered forward. When his sword, anticipating that his enemy's would attack him from the legs, went on the offensive and hit nothing but the air, Gannosuke jumped up and with his sword mutilated Gonpachiro's nose.

Gonpachiro's crippled blade should have sunk deep into his opponent's shoulder, but again it cut through the air in vain and his body collapsed forward.

By this time Gannosuke had crawled to the ground and with his blade had cut Gonpachiro's legs off at shin level.

The samurai assembled at the castle heard Gonpachiro's agonizing cries and rushed to the scene, but Gannosuke had already vanished and only Gonpachiro's gruesome corpse was left for all to see, both legs severed, the nose mutilated, and to top it off, the throat slashed. The brutal murder made everyone in the castle tremble and outraged the vassals of the fief. The exact circumstances surrounding the event became known through the mouth of the servant in charge of carrying the sandals to his master, who was found panicking near the body. Unlike the case of Saida Sonosuke, this time it was known with absolute certainty that the assassin was Gannosuke. A vassal of the fief had been slaughtered near the main entrance to the castle in broad daylight. And unlike when the *ronin* Kurakawa was killed, this time it was taken as a problem that affected the entire clan.

A plan to arrest Gannosuke was immediately decided upon, and caution signs were placed throughout the area around the castle, but there was no sign of the strange figure of Gannosuke, as if he had hidden away somewhere.

—There's a rumour that he's hiding in a cave on Mount Fuji. Send the police in!

—That guy can't be caught by traditional methods. Let them take a squad of riflemen and shoot him! — the vassals of the fief were commenting and

cursing in agitation, but Sasahara Shuzaburo held them back and offered himself:

—If we make such a fuss over a single wanderer and the other clans find out, it would be very embarrassing. Let me, Sasahara Shuzaburo, kill Kutsuki Gannosuke.

Upon learning that Gonpachiro had been killed, Shuzaburo was overcome with an irresistible desire to fight this unknown and strange swordsman, Kutsuki Gannosuke. Through the servant he was able to ensure that Gonpachiro had not been given a chance to even wield the spear.

"Even if Gonpachiro had been able to wield his spear, I have no doubt that he would not have been able to defeat this Gannosuke," — considered Shuzaburo.

The mere fact that the man who carried the spear behind his back was murdered already meant defeat for someone who had made the spear his life. There was no point in insisting that he was an inexperienced practitioner. When carrying weapons and engaging in combat to the death, excuses and mistakes cannot be tolerated. Victory and defeat, life and death: in the end those are the only answers.

"It must be acknowledged that Gannosuke would have been able to surpass him even if Gonpachiro had wielded the spear, simply by the strategy of making a surprise attack and knocking down the spear-carrier with one blow."

Such was Shizaburo's verdict that he resolved to go head-to-head with Gannosuke himself, using a lifetime of Nakamura School spear wielding skills.

Shuzaburo's proposal was accepted and, following his wishes, posters challenging Kutsuki Gannosuke were installed everywhere around the castle. To attract the proud and diabolical swordsman, the incomparable setting of the duel to the death before the feudal lord inside the castle of Sunpu.

As the challenge signs were hung, Shuzaburo began to take all the steps for his showdown with Gannosuke. He did not let his guard down twenty-four hours a day, and made sure that he was always the one carrying the spear if he made an exit.

He had named his precious spear "The Silver Serpent" but by then it had earned the nickname "Sasahara's Tongue-Cutting Spear".

The nickname was due to an anecdote that had happened several years before, on the occasion of the visit of the great counsellor Tadanaga to the mausoleum of Ieyasu on Mount Kuno. At one point, as they were climbing up the slope through the long row of stone steps leading to the top of the

mountain, the samurai leading the expedition shouted and stopped their steps. In the middle of the stone steps was a huge, coiled serpent more than ten feet long that raised its head.

Those samurai, who would not hesitate and throw themselves fearlessly against a sword-wielding foe, thought twice about this opponent who waved his long, unpleasant body back and forth, raised his monstrous head, and directed his demonic, wavy red tongue at them. Precisely when the feudal lord was there, the fear of making a mistake was more present than ever.

—Excuse me, — said Sasahara Shuzaburo, who was further back, as he made his way through the crowd. Arriving before the huge snake, he drew his spear and stood in front of it.

The immense reptile swayed mysteriously and seemed at any moment to be throwing itself against it, but just at the moment when it seemed to stretch out to attack it Shuzaburo pushed his spear and with the tip pierced the tongue of the snake, which had barely shown itself outside its mouth for a moment and had shone like a flame.

With the reptile's tongue pierced by the spear, Shuzaburo slowly moved the coiled snake to the right, to pull it out of the stone steps and leave it in the bushes to the side. Then he stuck the tip of the spear that pierced his tongue even deeper into the mouth cavity, and although it looked like it was going to be pulled out, he rotated the spear, pushed hard with the other end, and dethroned the head of the huge snake.

Both the ingenuity with which he managed to exterminate the giant reptile without spilling a single drop of blood on the way to the sanctuary his master was to follow, and the skill of the tip of his spear, which pierced the serpent's tongue just at the briefest moment when it flashed like a spark, earned unanimous praise. From then on Shuzaburo's spear became known as "the tongue-cutting spear".

What drove Shuzaburo to deliberately call his spear the "The Silver Serpent" was the determination that, just as that spear had been able to exterminate the enormous toad-eating snake, it could also wipe out the excellent toad-swordsman, Kutsuki Gannosuke.

Shuzaburo, who was daring and determined on the one hand, and meticulous and prudent on the other, studied Gannosuke's technique from every possible angle and honed his tactics to deal with it.

Despite his great confidence in the offensive skill of the spear, there was one point that Shuzaburo pondered deeply: how to defend against the blade of Gannosuke, who could apparently make his body stretch at will in a thousandth of a second and in the blink of an eye attack you in the face

and legs. For that reason he made a special protection made for the shins by gathering fragments of imported iron blades more than an inch thick. He often visited Chika and assured her that he would kill Kutsuki Gannosuke.

—I give you my word that Shuzaburo will finish off ...the murderer of Sonosuke and Gonpachiro. You should come to witness the fight, — he added.

Shuzaburo was thirty-two years old and had been widowed the previous year, so there were people who gossiped that he had been seeing Chika ever since, that he was captivated by her beauty and that his fighting spirit had been set on fire. But the truth was that at that time there was not a single hole in Shuzaburo's heart for something like that. It would be more accurate to say that the only thing that occupied his heart was how to defeat the Gannosuke toad-fencing.

Everyone openly acknowledged Shuzaburo's superb ability, and he himself had great confidence in his victory. The day of the duel was approaching, and the danger of an attack by surprise from Gannosuke seemed to be gone.

However, there were also many who harboured serious doubts about the outcome of the duel, and while they had no obvious reason to do so, the thought that Gannosuke might win lurked deep within them. It was also because of this that Saegusa, the advisor to the feudal lord, secretly ordered, and shared only with Shuzaburo that a squadron of riflemen be prepared on the day of the duel.

A plan was devised so that, in the event that Shuzaburo was defeated, a bullet would hit Gannosuke. The note attached to the posters, which stated that regardless of the outcome of the duel, Gannosuke would not be dealt with, was nothing more than a worthless ploy by the cunning Saegusa.

VII

The autumn sky at the end of September — according to the old lunar calendar — was completely clear and without a single cloud. The hour of the horse was approaching — approximately midday — and the white sand that was swept and purified after each fight reflected the rays of the sun dazzlingly.

Sasahara Shuzaburo slipped his lance ("The Silver Serpent") into his hands, stood on guard and declaimed in a commanding manner:

—Hey, Kutsuki Gannosuke, murderer of my cousin Gonpachiro! Get ready!

Then Gannosuke, leaving a distance of about a foot from the head of Shuzaburo's spear, took up his stance with his sword pointed at his rival's eyes and, staring at Shuzaburo's pupils above the tip of his, said in a low, guttural voice:

—Shuzaburo, you are a coward.

—What?!

—You have guns ready, huh?

—Oh, — Shuzaburo had already told Saegusa that his preparations were too obvious, so he was indignant, and just as he turned his head to look back and disapprove, Gannosuke kicked against the ground to gain momentum and jumped, the wind picking up his pass grazing the tip of his opponent's nose.

If it had been someone else, he would certainly have sliced off his nose without a problem. Even Shuzaburo himself had narrowly escaped, taking a step backwards.

But Shuzaburo regained his position in an instant. He quickly projected the spear in his hands into his opponent's chest, like a bolt of lightning. But that death thrust only mowed through the air. Gannosuke's body was suddenly gone.

He had adopted his toad-like posture: with his right knee raised, his left knee stretched back, his upper body bent and sunk about half a meter off the ground. The sword resting on his left shoulder pointed at Shuzaburo's legs and glowed with demand for blood.

For a time, both swordsmen glared at one another in their strange postures, not saying a word or moving a single muscle. Minutes passed that even caused the spectators to hold their breath and a tension that caused their entire bodies to seize up.

Shuzaburo lowered the tip of the spear slowly, almost imperceptibly, just when it seemed that the straight line extending downward passed through Gannosuke's neck, both swordsmen began to move at once.

Their attacking cries pierced the atmosphere of the place intensely and unsettled the spectators, but when they returned to their positions, it seemed that their postures had been slightly altered.

Gannosuke, unlike before, now had his right knee straight back and his left knee raised, and was crouching low, but had both his right arm and his blade straight. Shuzaburo grabbed the spear he had projected in his hands again and held it upright. The two remained in those positions for several seconds.

Then Gannosuke lowered his left knee and collapsed forward: before he

picked it up again, Shuzaburo's spear had penetrated deeply from Gannosuke's right shoulder to his spine.

As soon as he saw it, Shuzaburo staggered violently and brought his hand to his right knee. Gannosuke's blade had cut sideways into his right leg, pierced the imported iron shin guard, and sliced through to the bone.

Leaning on his upright spear, Shuzaburo watched Gannosuke's recumbent body closely.

Everyone had assumed that the fight was over, but when the referee Watanabe Kenmotsu was about to announce it, Gannosuke raised his head and then slowly crawled forward.

It seemed that, because of the deep wound he had suffered, he could no longer make out Shuzaburo's figure, as he drifted far to his left. He crawled slowly and heavily, like a gigantic, injured toad, and arrived near the place where the families of the vassals of the fief were witnessing the fighting.

He made a monstrous grunt and arched his upper body, and at once there was a shriek from the group of attendants.

Just as the knife thrown by Gannosuke stuck in the chest of Chika, who sat among the spectators, the silver snake thrown by Shuzaburo penetrated Gannosuke's back.

AIUTSU SHISHI HANTEKI

(«Simultaneous charge of the twin lions»)

I

The sun that illuminated the southern courtyard of the interior of Sunpu Castle had already reached its highest point. In the blue, clear autumn sky not a single cloud was visible, and a refreshing atmosphere extended far and wide from the summit of Mount Fuji to Miho no Matsubara.

A disastrous and macabre halo covered the courtyard of the castle, however: in the four duels to the death that had taken place so far, not only had four swordsmen shed their blood and collapsed on the sand, but two women had committed suicide by stabbing themselves on the other side of the curtains, and a woman who was in the audience had been stabbed in the chest with a dagger and had also lost her life as well.

Some people who could no longer bear what they were seeing and quietly left their seats and went away. There were also whispers asking for the suspension of the tournament.

On the other hand, Tadanaga, the lord of the castle, sat on the mat in the main stand, his pale face totally indifferent, like a being that never gets tired of seeing blood and suffering, and the only thing their eyes expressed from time to time was the outline of something resembling a dismissive smile.

Hirose Kyohei, the swordsman's announcer, shouted the names of the participants on the fifth duel of the day.

—On the east side, Tsuruoka Junnosuke Yoshikatsu.

For a few moments, he looked silently at the curtain on the eastern side, but for some reason the swordsman who should have appeared after being announced did not show. Hirose called out to him again, raising his voice even higher, but again there was no one to pull back the curtain to enter the fighting enclosure.

Strangely, he chose to turn to the west side for the moment to announce the other participant:

—The swordsman from the west side, Fukada Gonoshin Masaaki.

But, oddly enough, he didn't get an answer to his call that time either. He thought perhaps they might suddenly appear from somewhere unexpected, as Kutsuki Gannosuke had done in the previous match, so he looked around for a while, but there was no sign of that either.

The officers in charge of assisting Inspector Watanabe Kenmotsu whispered to one another in disarray and came and went through the curtains on the east and west sides in search of the two swordsmen, but there was no sign of them there.

Voices of confusion and surprise swept through the room like the wind carrying away the leaves of a tree. Both samurai were waiting ardently for this fight to die. At this point, there was no reason to flee and hide. And yet it was hard to believe that some unexpected event had happened to both of them at the same time.

Since the morning duels would conclude with this fifth confrontation, the swordsmen of the sixth combat, which was planned for the afternoon, were not yet in the castle. What could be done to fill this gap that had suddenly opened up?

As he cast a furtive glance and saw his lord's countenance grow frowned upon and begin to convulse with nervous spasms, the advisor Saegusa Izunokami, who carried the staff that day, started panicking.

—But what happened? Neither Tsuruoka nor Fukada appeared?

—That's... that's... right now we're looking for them everywhere inside the castle...

—Imbecile! Send someone to look for them in their quarters, you fool!

—Yes.

Several people ran to the mansions of the inspectors Matsudaira Inaba and Kinuta Hizen, where both swordsmen had been in custody for a few days. At that time, however, the sentries standing guard near the main entrance to the castle began to shout unusually, and there was an uproar and vilification.

—What is that?

—What is it?

They looked at each other and questioned each other, but they could see at once that what was rushing towards the castle walls were the figures of two men. Both were wielding drawn swords, and as they ran they attacked and cursed each other. The bare blades of their blades caught the sunlight and a glow ran through them like white fish jumping into a river.

—Oh! That's Tsuruoka!

—And the one chasing him is Fukada!

—How reckless! You see, selfishly starting a personal fight just before the duel begins...

—Fukada, stop it!

—Tsuruoka, put the sword away!

The group of people who were running towards them shouted at them, but

when they got close enough to the two swordsmen, they could not suppress a few cries of astonishment. Both Tsuruoka and Fukada had already received injuries to their bodies, and as a result their formal clothing, which appeared to have been prepared for the duel, was in a pitiful state, covered in blood.

Fukada Gonoshin's eyes were so wide that they seemed to be breaking out of their sockets and glowing with murderous, rampant hostility, he shouted:

—Hey, don't come any closer! Anyone who dares to get in the way will be killed!

If someone were to approach that imposing sword he was wielding, he would no doubt cut it in two on the spot without contemplation. The samurai, who knew the sharp point of Gonoshin's blade well, soon took five or six steps backwards.

For his part, Tsuruoka Junnosuke still seemed to retain some sense. He kept his eyes fixed on his opponent and did not let his guard down for a second.

—Fukada, sheathe the sword for the moment, and we will continue to fight as long as we wish before our lord, — he shouted, but Gonoshin's ears were no longer able to hear him.

—Coward! Are you trying to run away, Junnosuke? You piece of shit! Junnosuke was able to avoid the dangerous blow Gonoshin threw at him, and ran.

Surrounded at distance by the confused and tense vassals of the fief and tangled with one another, Tsuruoka and Fukada finally made their way to the combat grounds... or rather, it seemed as if Tsuruoka had led Fukada there.

The hundreds of people within the compound wondered anxiously what the commotion outside was all about, and when they saw the two men burst into the compound, embroiled in blood, they were stunned and breathless with surprise.

At the sight of them, Inspector Watanabe Kenmotsu rose from his stool and shouted:

—Have you lost your minds? Your master is here!

But when he saw the look, the posture, and the vehemence of both of them, he bit his lips and mumbled: "This cannot be".

For Fukada Gonoshin there was no longer his feudal lord or the hundreds of spectators, he saw only Tsuruoka Junnosuke.

The edge of his blade was thirsty for the blood of his rival and he shook himself spasmodically with a dreadful murderous aura. Tsuruoka

Junnosuke, at this point, could no longer sheathe the blade either. He was prepared because he was aware that the instant he returned the blade to its sheath, he would receive the thrust from his rival.

"There's no choice," — decided Watanabe Kenmotsu. There was no other solution but to throw himself between those two blades, even at the risk of being cut. Yet, just as Kenmotsu was preparing to make his way between the swords of those two swordsmen imbued with a morbid dementia, from the top of the stage, advisor Saegusa Izunokami raised his voice:

—Kenmotsu, do not bother, allow them to continue their fight.

Leaving aside the later judgement on whether it was right or not to break the rules, in this case there was no other option, so the decision Saegusa made for this case, with the wisdom of the years, was the right one.

II

If both Fukada and Tsuruoka had arranged for the duel they so longed for in the tournament, what was the thing that led them to cross their swords just before and wound each other?

At first, the two were childhood friends. Yet did it not seem that the only thing between them now was the boundless hatred and fury that was built into their blades by the flare of their flames?

If you were to ask a Buddhist monk, he would clear his throat and answer that it was the karma of previous lives, while a Confucianist would close his eyes for a few moments and explain that it was divine providence.

But we ordinary people have no choice but to breathe a sigh and conclude that it was just a bunch of random, trivial events that had been building up, and that the straw that broke the camel's back gave rise to such a strange result.

The first incident that occurred between the two went back five years. It happened in the fall when they were both seventeen years old. One day, a trial sword cutting practice was held at the *dojo* of Hyuga Hanbee Masahisa, the *Itto* style instructor of the fief. In the afternoon, some kids who had not been able to participate in the test surrounded the cutting platform that had been left in the garden and commented:

—At first glance it doesn't look like much, but it must be very difficult, right?

—Of course, if even Yoshiki has failed.

—And us, how much would we be able to cut? — commented one half jokingly and Gonoshin, who was present, jumped in without hesitation:

—How? I'm sure I can cut it all off.

He drew his *katana* as if nothing had happened and headed for the platform. Above it were two bundles of straw tied together, about one meter long and about six inches in diameter, wrapped around a green bamboo core.

After sprinkling the blade with water from a small bucket on the side, Gonoshin stood in a pose with his legs spread and raised his sword above his head.

—Eeh!

—Oh!

They all shouted in unison and backed away.

The *katana* had gone through the straw, but when it touched the green bamboo it made a loud sound, and the blade broke in half and went out to the left.

—I've... That *katana* is useless...

Gonoshin withdrew in shame.

—Well, let me try, — said Junnosuke and headed off to take his place on the platform.

He leaned his body back, raised his sword above his head, gave a shout, and when it seemed that his knees were separating, he split the bundle of straw and the green bamboo core in two.

—That's how you do a cut with your sword, — proclaimed a smiling Junnosuke.

This does not mean that there was that much difference between the skills of Gonoshin and Junnosuke. It simply happened that Gonoshin's sword was more fragile, due to the large wavy marks left on the blade during the steel tempering process.

Compared to the first ancient swords for martial arts produced before the Eiroku (1558-1570) and Tensho (1573-1592) eras, from the end of the Keicho (1596-1615) era many of the *katanas* were tempered in such a way that magnificent and deep patterns were produced on the blade, and it was not until years later (thanks to the essays of Matsumura Hideki, who pointed it out bitingly in his "*Questions about Swords*", and later Suishinshi Masahide, who reiterated it in "*On the Functionality of Swords*") that it became known that precisely because of this they were more fragile and more easily broken.

The boys who witnessed it were also aware of the fact that the sword was broken was not the fault of the swordsman. As one might expect, however, all praise focused on Junnosuke, who had managed to break the bundle in half, rather than on Gonoshin who had broken the blade.

Normally, Gonoshin would not have given the matter any further consideration. But Junnosuke's comment ("This is how you do a cut with your sword") had sunk deep into his soul.

"Damn it! How dare he say that to me? He's rude!"

Perhaps it caught him in a bad mood, but coming from a friend who knew that he usually dismissed the senseless comments of his close friends, those aggressive words remained stuck in the depths of his heart like a poisoned thorn impossible to banish.

From that day on, Gonoshin's attitude toward Junnosuke changed, and he began to speak to him in a strange manner full of innuendo. His interactions were cold, with harmless exchanges of words charged with a threatening tone that surprised his "opponent".

"Gonoshin is a little strange..."

Junnosuke noticed and intentionally softened his words as he spoke to him, but he hit a stiff answer head-on, he tilted his head a couple of times in confusion as he thought: "What a strange guy. Well, I'll let him do whatever he wants!"

At first it was a psychological conflict limited only to the two of them, but soon their companions realized, too, and they began to suspect that things were going badly between them. It was then that Gonoshin began to openly show his hostility in front of everyone.

In the spring when they were both eighteen years old, a ceremony was held in honor of all those who had reached maturity that year, and in the duel that took place Gonoshin beat Junnosuke insistently on the shoulders. In those days, training duels were fought with wooden swords and without a mask or protective gloves. Since hitting an opponent hard could cause serious injury, it was customary to stop the blade just before it touched the opponent's skin. Of course, in duels between beginners there were many who would vehemently beat their opponent and cause him injuries, either from their excess strength or from their opponent's weakness.

Now, Gonoshin and Junnosuke were equal in ability and, even when young, both were considered "the tiger" and "the dragon", the best disciples of Hyuga Hanbee. Everyone understood that those blows had not been made by mistake, but that it was done with a clear intent. Obviously, Junnosuke could not complain after being beaten, but his indignation showed on his face.

People commented that the difference between their personalities caused friction between them, and because of the combative spirit of two rivals competing to demonstrate their skill in the same *dojo*. This was an explanation that for the moment left everyone satisfied. It seemed that the

difference in character between Gonoshin — active and emotionally passionate — and Junnosuke — quiet and discreet, which during his childhood was not an insurmountable obstacle for the continuation of their friendship, now made them constantly oppose each other.

Moreover, they were competing in the same *dojo* with roughly the same skills. More than the daily conflicts that caused disagreement between the two, people noticed the fierce, youthful nature of the interest and motivation they perceived in their fearsome silhouettes as they devoted themselves body and soul to intense training, always aware of each other.

III

The second fortuitous event that made the disagreement between the two more decisive, and that engraved in Gonoshin's soul a lifelong enmity impossible to erase, came when they were both in their twenties.

That year Gonoshin, after the death of his father, succeeded him as head of the Fukada family, and his paternal uncle Fukada Judayu told him:

—Gonoshin, now that you are the head of the family you have to find a wife soon, eh?

—Uncle, in fact I already chose a girl who will be my wife, — Gonoshin replied clearly, looking into his eyes.

—Ha, ha, ha, you have left me speechless. You've dropped it as if you were already expecting this question. Well, let's see — who is this girl?

—Miss Kazu, Yamaoka Ichitaro's daughter.

—What? The one who lives right next door? That Yamaoka? Ha, ha, ha!

You've got it pretty close! Ah, in that case I know the girl too. She's a good girl, and Yamaoka's a great man, too. Well, I'll take care of it, I'm sure I can do the deed for you.

The helpful Judayu was supposed to take care of everything, but three days later he returned to Gonoshin's house looking serious.

—Gonoshin, the thing with Yamaoka's daughter was impossible. Forget about her.

—What? What do you mean, impossible?

—That's right. She's engaged to a previous suitor, who came only four or five days earlier. It's a pity, but there's nothing to be done. There are many more girls to choose from, forget about her.

Obviously, this was not a girl he was deeply in love with, but he simply liked her. When his uncle told him to find himself a wife, her name came to his lips at that moment, simply because he did not know another option. Gonoshin was determined to withdraw his proposal, but when he heard a

comment that escaped Judayu in passing, his face suddenly changed in color.

—You say it was Tsuruoka Junnosuke, that previous suitor? Uncle, I can't give up. I'm determined to make Kazu my wife no matter what. Please talk to them again.

—Ho, ho, ho! I see you've been hit hard. I hear they haven't done the engagement gift exchange with that Tsuruoka yet... Shall I try again? Despite several negotiations, the desired result was not finally achieved. When Gonoshin learned that Kazu had exchanged the engagement gifts with Junnosuke, his entire body burned and his eyes caught fire.

—That damn Junnosuke is always bothering me, — he mumbled and gritted his teeth.

It seemed inconceivable to him that both would have selected the same woman as an object of desire by chance. His thinking became so twisted that he was convinced that despite the fact that he had hidden his feelings for her from the beginning, Junnosuke realized that Gonoshin was in love with Kazu and decided to steal her from him.

However, to save face and pretend that the fact that Kazu married Junnosuke did not affect him in the least, Gonoshin wasted no time in marrying another girl. But as expected, things did not go well with a wife he married out of stubbornness. As soon as they were married, Gonoshin got a taste for sake in the tea houses, and he frequented the restaurants in the red-light district and Nishikoji.

At a restaurant called Shimizu he met Chiyo. She said she was going to turn sixteen. She was a sweet and refined young woman which was strange to see working in a restaurant as the owner's adopted daughter. Gonoshin, under the influence of alcohol, tried to seduce her. When he was rejected, he frequented the place and proposed to her more and more insistently.

On Children's Day, May 5, driven by the extra impetus provided by the sake served at the castle, Gonoshin appeared at the Shimizu with a group of bad company. Helped in part by the half-joking incitements of his friends, it was said that he would bring Chiyo to her senses that day, but the girl fled in disgust and Gonoshin chased her into a corner of a corridor.

—Mr. Fukada, it won't happen. Please, leave me alone, — said the girl in a tearful voice, her body shaking with the tremors. The sadness that overflowed from her big black eyes only managed to add fuel to the fire of his lust.

—Chiyo, I will never stop insisting, listen to what I am going to tell you, eh? You will not regret it... Hey! Why don't you come to your senses?

He took her by the shoulders and pulled her close to his chest, but just then the sliding door to the room at the end of the hall opened and Junnosuke appeared, who approached them slowly and quietly.

—Fukada, let her go.

—What?!

Gonoshin looked at him angrily, but Junnosuke whispered in his ear:

—Stop it. Lord Kinuta is in that room.

Seeing that it was Junnosuke who was trying to dissuade him, just as he had just laid hands on the girl, and hearing that inspector Kinuta was right in the front room, Gonoshin felt embarrassed and released Chiyo, as expected.

—Bah, there is nothing interesting here, let's go somewhere else. Come, all of you, — said grumpy Gonoshin to his friends.

Once they had left, Chiyo thanked Junnosuke, blinking sadly with her sweet eyes.

—Mr. Tsuruoka, I am so sorry. I am most grateful to you for what you've done. — she bowed her head.

It was a lie that Inspector Kinuta was in that room, of course.

About a month after that, one of Gonoshin's bad friends approached him with a mocking smile and commented:

—Fukada, Tsuruoka has played you. Apparently this guy has got hold of Chiyo.

—How?

—I saw them, I assure you, with my own eyes. Yesterday, in the reserved room of the Shimizu, Chiyo was hugging him on her lap, and they were squeezing and playing. Ha, ha, ha. I saw them!

In reality, Chiyo was simply sitting next to Junnosuke pouring him sake, but that is how that friend described it to Gonoshin.

"Shit! He can't get enough of Kazu from me, he steals Chiyo from me too, who knows I'm in love with."

The resentment born within his youthful soul became even more pungent when a woman was involved, and it became an even harder tangle to undo. The visceral hatred Gonoshin felt for Junnosuke became much stronger, mixed with bitter experiences, and burned brightly.

IV

In the spring of the fifth year of the Kan'ei era (1628), a burly man of impressive physique and with sword wound marks on his bearded face appeared in the castle town of Sunpu. From his appearance, he gave the

impression of being a survivor of the battlefield just by looking at him, so he probably must have been in his forties. He carried with him a letter of introduction written by a certain person from the Kyushu area and addressed to Torii Naritsugu, *daimyo* of Tosa and member of the council of elders, expressing his desire to enter service in the fief as a samurai.

Thirteen years had already passed since the fall of Osaka Castle. The bases of the Tokugawa shogunate were being consolidated and it seemed unlikely that there would be any great battles in the near future. Therefore, each clan had more than enough of the warriors they already possessed, so, also for financial reasons, they refrained as much as possible from hiring new personnel.

Rumor had it, however, that the lord of Sunpu Castle, Tokugawa Tadanaga, hired them on the spot, if they were skilled warriors, and offered them good compensation according to their abilities. Thus there were *ronin* from all over the place who used all sorts of influences and came to offer their services as samurai, and in fact they still hired many of them.

And as such news reached Edo, the shogunate's suspicions of Tadanaga grew. In a room of the *shogun's* council of elders' residence in Chiyoda Castle, Edo, the following words began to be whispered in secret: "Lord Tadanaga's betrayal".

But in any case, whenever Tadanaga had one of these candidates to serve him, he would have them fight in his presence against the best samurai of the fief, and on the basis of that duel he would decide whether to accept or reject them. This warrior named Iio Jubee, who had come through Torii, was also ordered to fight in the garden inside the castle overlooking the banquet hall and the result was spectacular.

He defeated Aiki Kyuzo, master of the *Gan* style, and showed good results when facing Izubuchi Heijiro, the expert of the *Shinkage* style. In addition, the instructors Sasahara Shuzaburo and Hyuga Hanbee, who were in charge of the refereeing, stated that in a real combat Iio's sword would show a much greater lethal capacity than a duel with wooden swords could demonstrate.

—Bravo! You have an admirable skill. You're hired! You said you were a *ronin* who had served Chosokabe Morichika, right? — Tadanaga asked. Iio Jubee, kneeling before him, immediately lowered his head and responded, showing no trace of shyness:

—That's right, my lord. In the Osaka campaign I followed Morichika's orders and fought on the opposite side against the *shogun's* clan.

—Ha ha ha! You're an honest guy. Don't worry, being torn between friend and foe is the norm for today's warrior.

As he stood up after thanking him, Iio Jubee dropped something shiny off his chest on the garden floor.

—Oh!

Iio Jubee's face instantly turned pale and tense, and that of instructor Sasahara Shuzaburo, who was watching him from the top of the outer corridor, turned red as he shouted at him:

—Iio Jubee, wait! — Sasahara faced Iio, who was trying to run away after quickly picking up the object that fell on the floor and hid it on his chest again, and continued with more insults: "I have noticed that you are a follower of Christianity, which is forbidden²²! I am sure that what you have hidden in your chest is a crucifix!"

Iio stopped in his tracks and turned. His face oozed a scornful smile of despair. Then, from among the samurai present in the large room, an old warrior named Ono Matazaemon moved one knee forward and said:

—From the beginning I've been thinking about where I've seen that face before, and there's no longer any doubt in my mind. Iio Jubee is a false name. In fact, I saw him serving Akashi Takenori as Iimura Kuroemon. Come on, Iimura, recognize your own name!

Ono Matazaemon was a man who had once served Mizuno Katsunari and during the campaigns in Osaka had often faced the troops of Akashi Takenori.

—Heh heh! You have discovered me. Then there is nothing to be done.

Indeed, I am Iimura Kuroemon Masayasu.

A broad smile formed on his bearded face, and in the glow of his piercing eyes burned an insolent expression of despair that seemed to say, "Do with me as you will".

Several generals under Akashi Takenori, the famous Christian *daimyo*, also believed, roughly speaking, in this heretical doctrine. The reason Takenori entered Osaka Castle was because Hideyori had secretly promised him that, in the event of victory, he would be granted the freedom to profess the Christian faith. The troops under Takenori's command fought bravely, with the cross hanging around their necks, but were annihilated. Only Takenori and a few others managed to flee and their trail was lost. Iimura Kuroemon was one of them.

—The mere fact that he is a believer in the forbidden Christian faith is already an insult, but he has also lied about his identity. Kill that insolent

²² *The Tokugawa shogunate banned Christianity and persecuted missionaries and converts. After the expulsion of the missionaries, many Japanese who had converted to Christianity continued to practice their faith in secret, even though they were in danger of being tortured or executed.*

man who has mocked our Lord! — cried the adviser Saegusa after reading the expression on Tadanaga's face.

Iimura looked at the officers and warriors who surrounded him on all four sides with their swords drawn, and although he too had already drawn his, he said:

—Even if he falls from grace, there is a part of the samurai that cannot be easily destroyed. However, let me say one thing: advisor, I want to make it clear that the person who recommended me, lord Torii, was not aware of my situation. Come on, you can attack me without any qualms.

One rushed at once to attack him recklessly, but Iimura pierced him with a single sword strike and managed to break out of the encirclement in which he had been placed. He returned to his guard and eliminated the next attacker, and continued to kill anyone who approached him.

Once he had knocked down three opponents with such ease, those around him tightened their muscles, their limbs stiffened, and no one tried to attack him so thoughtlessly anymore.

—Fukada Gonoshin, get him! — ordered instructor Hyuga Hanbee, turning his face back. Gonoshin stood at the end of the corridor. Surprised, he tied the ribbon behind him to hold on to the sleeves of his kimono and went down to the garden at once.

On the one hand, there was a man who, although healthy and robust, was already approaching fifty. Moreover, he had exhausted his strength in two previous bouts and although he had already knocked down three opponents, he was, after all, stuck in a predicament with no possibility of escaping. On the other hand, there was a young, energetic swordsman known as "the dragon", a disciple of Hyuga. It seemed obvious who would win the duel.

However, as one would expect from someone as seasoned on the battlefield as Iimura Kuroemon, his fearsome fighting spirit was so deeply rooted that he persisted to the end. He skillfully stopped Gonoshin's sharp blade, repelled it violently, and counterattacked. In short, he did not give up easily.

Gonoshin's breathing was increasingly violent. Iimura's chest was exposed and his oscillating muscles were glowing with sweat.

The bloody struggle had gone on for nearly half an hour and attendants, sitting in a row, were absorbed and focused all their attention on following the blades of the swords that glowed in the air. But as Tadanaga's face grew darker and darker as the fighting dragged on, Saegusa gave a new order.

—It's over, surround him and kill him!

Seeing that Iimura had already reached the limit of his strength, two samurai rushed over and attacked him from the left and right, but Iimura cut off one of samurai's right arm and the other was cut deeply into the left shoulder.

Just then, a young samurai arrived at a brisk pace from the row of samurai houses of the western district, approached Iimura from behind and just as he was behind him he roared at him:

—You criminal!

Iimura turned and instantly his huge body staggered, he took a step forward and fell heavily to the ground.

With a single *katana* strike (drawing and attacking in the same motion) the samurai had cut him from his right shoulder to the base of his stomach.

The attacker, Tsuruoka Junnosuke, gave Iimura a final thrust to finish it off, wiped the bloody *katana* clean and returned it to its scabbard. He turned to Tadanaga, knelt, and bowed.

V

Gonoshin found reason to take offense at each of Junnosuke's actions, and he could no longer bear it.

Junnosuke had simply overheard that there was a troublemaker making a fuss in the garden of the banquet hall and headed there. But from Gonoshin's point of view, that damned Junnosuke had robbed him of all merit after he had been facing his rival for a half hour waiting for his energy to run out, and he could not contain his anger at him.

"I'm going to kill that guy", Gonoshin thought. He opposed Junnosuke in everything and showed obvious hostility.

Junnosuke noticed this and tried to play it down, but this made Gonoshin even more angry.

The antagonism between them was so evident and intense that Master Hyuga Hanbee forbade the two to confront one another in the *dojo*.

Despite their totally opposite personalities, both mastered the secret technique of *Itto* known as *Shishi Hanteki* ("The Lion's Counter"). It consisted of starting with the long sword raised over the head and held backwards, as if it was lying on the samurai's back, and, just at the moment when the enemy's sword descends, throwing oneself like a bolt of lightning towards the opponent's chest. What decided the result of the duel above all was to possess immovable courage and strength to act with agility.

Once there came a moment when the clash between the two seemed

impossible to avoid. The trigger for this bloody confrontation was the 5th of April in the sixth year of the Kan'ei era (1629), the last day of the great festival of the Sengen shrine. This festival was known as "the festival of flowers" and, as it was the biggest event in the castle town, it was celebrated with great pomp and crowds of people under the cherry trees that had just sprouted new leaves. After five straight days of festivities, on that last day people were already beginning to show some signs of fatigue but, on the other hand, they also felt sorry that this was the last day of the festival, so both young and old went to meet in the huge shrine at the foot of Mount Shizuhata.

Fukada Gonoshin, who was walking through the crowd accompanied by a few of his companions, suddenly stopped short,

—Fukada, what's going on? — surprised at Gonoshin's pose — he was gripping the hilt of his sword tightly with a fierce look — a companion at his side grabbed his arm instinctively.

—Get out of the way! — Gonoshin yelled at him.

His companions, looking straight ahead, were speechless and surprised. Thirteen or fourteen yards to the right, in the shadow of an old cherry tree, they discovered the figure of Tsuruoka Junnosuke. If that were all it was, there would be nothing to be surprised about, but Junnosuke had his hand on the shoulder of a young woman, looking like a married one, and it seemed to be moving toward her chest.

That woman was Kato, Gonoshin's wife. Gonoshin ran up to them and shouted:

—Adulterers! It's unforgivable!

At the sound of his cries, both raised their heads and parted with each other in surprise.

—Gonoshin, please, you misunderstand.

—It's not what it seems, I assure you. One of the chariots pushed me and I nearly fell, but Mr. Tsuruoka helped me.

Junnosuke and Kato justified themselves vehemently, but Gonoshin was deaf to their explanations.

—Hey, Junnosuke! Excuses will not help you. En garde!

—Are you out of your mind, Gonoshin? Don't do anything you'll regret!

—Draw, you coward! Draw!

—Fukada, what are you doing? — His comrades interceded, after running up to him.

—Please fix this up. Fukada, you'll be a laughingstock. Consider where you are, this is a shrine compound!

A shrine! Gonoshin had his teeth grinded but could hardly control himself.

—Okay, I'll let it go this time, but, Junnosuke, if you don't want to be considered a coward, then deal with me later under normal conditions.

—Stupid! They're nothing but absurd and false accusations. I don't remember causing you any disgrace.

—Huh! Are you afraid of my sword? Or are you so attached to life?

Coward! — Gonoshin concluded, spitting on his rival.

Junnosuke was able to dodge the spit that was thrown upon him, but an irrepressible rage suddenly appeared on his face.

—You're rude! All right. Whatever the circumstances, it's unforgivable to face a samurai and spit on him. We'll meet in a duel another day!

—Oh! Don't forget those words.

Thanks to the help of his companions, he moved Kato to his parents' home, but the next day an official letter of challenge arrived for Junnosuke from Gonoshin.

However, through the mouths of the comrades who were present at the site of the conflict, the incident came to the attention of the vassal officers and they immediately sent them both a notice: "Dueling for personal reasons is strictly forbidden".

Gonoshin again strongly insisted, arguing that his wish as a warrior was to be granted permission to duel. Junnosuke also stated that, at this point, the only solution was to resolve the situation with sword in hand.

If they were forbidden to fight, they were capable of leaving the clan and becoming *ronin* to decide their duel themselves.

—They both possess skills too valuable to be left to die just like that, but if we allow them both to become *ronin*, the fiefdom will lose them. Instead, let them face each other. Isn't it better that only one of them remains after the duel?

That was the opinion that eventually prevailed. And these were the circumstances that led to this duel being included in the tournament of duels to the death before the feudal lord.

VI

The last fortuitous event occurred on the very day of the duel. Both were delayed from the agreed time of the duel. To prevent both of them from seeing each other's faces and drawing their swords before the match, they were placed under house arrest at the residences of inspectors Matsudaira Inaba and Kinuta Hizen, respectively. On the day in question, Junnosuke was already prepared and waiting for the time to leave in a room, sitting on the tatami.

"You have to see the twists and turns of life. I'm going to go up against a guy I used to spend time with every day since we were kids."

Memories of his nearly twenty years of relationship with Gonoshin were spinning in his mind like those spinning lamps on which silhouettes are projected, but suddenly the cause of the first quarrel between the two came to his mind: what happened on the day of the trial cuts with the swords.

"If his sword had not broken that day, it probably would not have come to this", he thought and immediately doubts began to creep about his own *katana*. Although he considered it good enough, it could not be said to be the best of all swords in terms of prestige, and it could not be said that it would surely not break.

He went to the room of the administrator Kajio Jinsuke and asked him, if he had a good sword, to lend it to him for a public duel. He already knew that Kajio was an expert at judging all manner of blades and had in his possession quite a few *katana* that were engraved with the names of the artisans who forged them.

Obviously, Kajio had nothing for or against Fukada or Tsuruoka, but since Junnosuke had been living in the same residence for several months, he had naturally become familiar with him, so he willingly agreed and gave his prized *katana*.

As is often the case with the elderly, Kajio's conversation was long and redundant. Junnosuke was losing his patience, but since he was going to lend a sword, he held on and listened to the speech about their strengths. Finally, he borrowed one that suited his needs and hurried out of Matsudaira Inaba's residence to head for the castle.

As he reached the moat near the main entrance to the castle, he heard the rumble of drums. No doubt they were announcing the beginning of the fifth duel, in which he was to take part.

—Damn it! I am late.

He told himself that he could not lose his cool at that very moment and, in the shadow of the pines in the moat, he tied the ribbon to hold up the sleeves of his kimono, rolled up his *hakama* and tied a cloth ribbon tightly around his forehead. He quickly prepared so that he would not be surprised if he was attacked as soon as he entered the fighting grounds, and ran under the shade of the trees toward the castle gate, but just then something made him take a step back.

Unexpectedly, the opponent in question, Gonoshin, had shouted at him from some ten yards behind, brandishing his blade unsheathed:

—Hey, you, Junnosuke! Let's get started!

Shortly before this, Gonoshin had left Kinuta Hizen's residence somewhat

uneasy, thinking that he would be late, but as soon as he left someone called him and stopped him.

—Excuse me, Mr. Fukada.

It was Kazu, Junnosuke's wife, leaning against the mud wall of the samurai residences with a melancholy expression on her pale, thin face.

—Yes? — repressing his complex emotions, Gonoshin looked back at Kazu, the woman he had once desired as his wife and who was now the wife of his bitter enemy.

—Mr. Fukada, whatever happens, will you face today Junnosuke?

—You already know that!

—Mr. Fukada, Junnosuke and Kato adultery is nothing but false and unfounded accusation. Neither Junnosuke nor Lady Kato would be capable of such an immoral act, and yet they had not exchanged a single word until that day. I have spoken to Mrs. Kato and asked her specifically.

With a desperate expression, Kazu pleaded with Gonoshin to do whatever he could to stop the duel that had been caused by false suspicions. Her feminine instinct told Kazu that the duel was useless and that she could not stand idly by, but neither could she deny that she was also moved by a certain fear that she harboured in the depths of her heart: although it was said that her husband and Gonoshin were equal in ability, due to the daily contact with her husband, she knew that he was in certain aspects a little bit wimpy. Being so, would it not be impossible for her to oppose the terrible fighting spirit of Gonoshin that she had heard about?

Gonoshin did not want to argue further and intended to run, but Kazu grabbed him by the sleeve. Seeing her begging so passionately, Gonoshin suddenly had some doubts.

—Junnosuke asked you to come, didn't he?

—No, you're wrong. I haven't seen Junnosuke since the day of the festival. It was all my idea.

Despite receiving a refusal, Gonoshin became even more convinced that Junnosuke had sent her with the intention of weakening his fighting spirit.

—Since we have come to this point, it would be foolish to cancel the duel,

— Gonoshin said conclusively over his shoulder. He disengaged himself from Kazu's hand and ran.

Arriving near the main gate, he recognized Junnosuke later under the shadow of the pines, tying his ribbon and rolling up his *hakama*.

"Aha, that wretch sent his wife to tell me those things so that I would let my guard down, intending to lurk and attack me. Damn coward!"

He too prepared swiftly and, with his sword already drawn, made his way

under the shadow of the pine forest, approached Junnosuke and shouted at him:

—Hey, you, Junnosuke! Let's get started!

Junnosuke, who had assumed that Gonoshin would already be in the battlefield, saw him approaching with his sword and thought, "This coward has ambushed me," and his blood boiled with rage, but he said:

—Oh! Gonoshin? Shouldn't you save yourself for the duel before our lord?

—Same to you. Draw!

—Let's go to the dueling arena.

—What for? At this point that excuse is no longer valid. Draw! If you don't, I'll cut you!

And with a sudden slash to the left shoulder, he made Junnosuke's garment blood-soaked in the blink of an eye.

—You're stubborn, you wretch! I can't forgive you for this! — Junnosuke also drew his blade and stood on guard.

They engaged in the fight and exchanged sword strikes and insults as they caused each other injuries.

They advanced and passed through the main gate and were finally surrounded by the crowd that came running in after hearing the confused shouts of the sentries.

And so they came to where they were now, facing each other inside the place where the duel was being held.

The audience there did not know what circumstances had led those two to cross swords outside the assigned place for the duel or how long they had been engaged in combat. So they were speechless and did not look away from the edges of those blades, which seemed to hold such deep hatred.

For a few moments the combatants simply stared fiercely at one another, perhaps intending to catch their breath as they waited for the opportunity to attack, but it was Gonoshin who first raised his blade and raised it over his head.

—Oh!

—It's *Shishi Hanteki* ("The Lion's Counter") stance!

By the time such whispers had spread among the onlookers, Junnosuke had adopted the same stance as well, holding his blade high as if it was resting on his back.

They moved very slowly.

Amidst the breathtaking tension, the space between them was shrinking inch by inch.

—Uoooh!

From their mouths came in unison cries of attack similar to the growl of a

wild animal, the two swords pointed over the rival's head and just when it seemed they would strike with a devastating force, white sparks flew through the air, a shrill clacking sound of brass was heard and both swords snapped in half, and those pieces flew out, one to each side. They had struck one another head-on.

—Oh! — exclaimed those present and began to move excitedly in their seats.

Just then Junnosuke and Gonoshin smashed their bodies against each other and began to struggle. Thus, their bodies were almost petrified with their heads resting on each other's shoulders.

On the order of Watanabe Kenmotsu four samurai approached them from behind and took Junnosuke and Gonoshin by the shoulders. As they were separated, both fell heavily to the ground.

Both had the *katana* cleaved into half by their opponent's body, sunk to the hilt.

KAZAGURU MAJU JIUCHI

(«The crosscutting blow of the windmill»)

I

When rumors started that the condition of the retired *shogun* Hidetada showed no improvement, a secret, completely confidential letter was delivered to Date Masamune²³ from Doi Toshikatsu, the chief administrator of the palace kitchens.

The contents of the letter were of a special matter. It told him that in the event that the great Hidetada *shogun* passed away, an agreement had already been reached with the lords of the Owari and Kii fiefdoms, and they had written oaths of support from such and such a supporter from various clans both *fudai* and *tozama*, to support his third son Tadanaga, the great advisor to Suruga, as a successor in place of the current head of the family (Iemitsu), and thus also convey to Date the wish of the whole country, et cetera.

After reading the letter, a fleeting flash of joy appeared in Masamune's only eye, dancing like a goblin. It was a gleam of mischievous glee reminiscent of the expression that always glowed on the face of young Masamune more than fifty years ago, when he left Sendai and rampaged away.

That flash disappeared instantly, however. Masamune regained his customary sly, septuagenarian look, smiled wryly and told his son and assistant war minister, Date Muneatsu, who stood at his side:

—The kitchen manager is playing his tricks...

Doi Toshikatsu — who at the time was said to be one of the most influential officials along with Sakai Tadayo, the director of the ministry of traditional music — he had been confined to his home for a month now, allegedly due to a sudden illness. It was said that he was counting on the disapproval of the retired *shogun* Hidetada, or that he had had a conflict with the current *shogun* Iemitsu, but none of that was really clear.

What no one doubted, however, was that the illness was merely a pretext. Under the circumstances, it was not unreasonable to think that Toshikatsu could be in collusion with the great advisor from Suruga, who had

²³ Outstanding *daimyo*, founder of the city of Sendai and known as "the one-eyed dragon" because of his right eye.

previously shown ambition to control the entire country in order to overthrow the Iemitsu.

However...

—That Toshikatsu is up to something. Does he think I have done nothing but eat and grow old in these seventy years? — Masamune laughed and instantly announced to the war minister, — I'm going to visit the mansion of the director of the ministry of traditional music.

—Honorable member of the council of elders, I was puzzled by this letter. In reality, it has gone from bad to worse, — Masamune said to Tadayo once inside the spacious hall of his mansion and handed him the secret message.

Tadayo glanced at Masamune's face and took the letter. He read the contents, bowed his head slightly, drew his lower lip out and held the letter to his chest. His expression was like the one children get when they stick out their tongues.

And so, without making a single mention of the secret letter, he began to chat about other things unimportant and finally said in a goodbye to Masamune:

—I'm very grateful to you for taking up the trouble.

Four hours after Masamune left, the *daimyo* Todo Takatora and Shimazu Iehisa appeared, and then announced the visit of Muri Hidenari.

By the evening of the third day, the number of people who had come to notify him of Toshikatsu's secret message was already thirteen. The last of them was Kato Tadahiro, who presented himself with an extremely grim face.

Each of the *daimyo* who had come to inform him had his own opinion on the matter, and obviously after learning of it they were puzzled and had much to say. However, Tadayo treated them all equally with the same indifference and dismissed them with a simple greeting ("Thank you for taking up the trouble"), without saying anything exceptional.

From the beginning, Tadayo disapproved of this "ruse" of Toshikatsu.

Tadanaga, the younger brother of Iemitsu, had enjoyed the favor of his parents since childhood and tended to despise his older brother, a situation that was witnessed by several *daimyo* throughout the country. And it is a well-known fact that these *daimyo* began to regard Tadanaga as the person who should be the successor to the *shogun*, and showed him greater reverence than to his brother Iemitsu.

By a decision of Ieyasu, Iemitsu was appointed as the successor to the

shogunate, but on the other hand Tadanaga was promoted to the position of great advisor at the age of twenty and received the territories of Suruga, Totomi, and Kai provinces. All of this placed Tadanaga in a position overseeing the three branches of the Tokugawa clan. All those who passed along the Tokaido Route²⁴, because of the system of alternate residences of the feudal lords in Edo, visited Tadanaga at Sunpu castle to pay their respects and revered him as if he were a second *shogun*.

Tadanaga wanted to receive Osaka Castle, but he was not granted it. He also aspired to take over a territory worth one million *roku* and was not granted it either. So due to a pent-up rage and anger, he often exhibited violent behavior and had an outrageous reputation. He had a particularly good relationship with the *tozama daimyos*, hired many *ronin*, acquired all the rifles and all the weapons he wanted...

In short, there was enough deeds to suspect a plan of rebellion.

To learn the true intentions of the *daimyo*, Doi Toshikatsu had proposed sending a letter encouraging support for an insurrection masked as a last resort. The goal was to be able to expose and at the same time root out the evil while Hidetada was still alive, but

Sakai Tadayo did not have much hope that it would work. He felt that even if someone had real motives for the insurrection, he would not show any immediate reaction to a mere missive.

Finally he felt it would not hurt to try, so he approved of both Toshikatsu's feigned illness and imprisonment, and the sending of the secret messages. But when he saw that each and every one of the thirteen *daimyo* to whom Toshikatsu had sent the letter came to deliver it, he could only smile bitterly as he felt like saying, "Now you see? I told you..."

In any case, what was evident was that the *daimyo* feared the shogunate with all their hearts, and depending on how long it took them to report that they had received the letter, a small, subtle shadow could be discerned in their minds.

Tadayo went to visit the reclusive Toshikatsu in secret to discuss the matter.

—It is time for you to return to the castle. I am just very busy and cannot handle everything, — he said before saying goodbye.

A few days later, however, Tadayo visited Toshikatsu again, this time with a terribly serious countenance.

—I am astonished. I received this letter again today from Date, — he

²⁴ The most important of the five routes that crossed Japan during the Edo period connected the old imperial capital (Kyoto) with the new capital and residence of the shogun (Edo).

explained, and handed him a new letter of encouragement to participate in the rebellion, the contents of which were identical to the secret, false missive from Toshikatsu. But in addition, this letter was signed by Asakura Nobumasa, Tadanaga's advisor and provincial governor of Chikugo. It had no doubt been written at the behest of Tadanaga himself.

—But this... — Toshikatsu paled.

After thinking and discussing the matter, the two concluded that it was best to wait and see how many of those who had received Tadanaga's letter came to deliver it this time.

Compared to the previous time, the notifications were much slower and came little by little: in an interval of about ten days the sixteen notifications were reached.

Naturally, it was to be expected that there would be some discrepancy between the recipients Toshikatsu sent his secret letter and the recipients Tadanaga encouraged. There were nine who had received both letters and reported on both; there were seven who received and reported on Tadanaga's letter only; and there were four who despite previously reporting on Toshikatsu's letter, this time had not delivered a letter.

—Kuroda, Kato, Horio, Kamo... only these four, though they reported the letter the first time, have not come to say anything this time, — Tadayo pointed out to Toshikatsu after showing him the sixteen letters.

—But we have no proof that the lord of Suruga sent these four a secret letter, — Toshikatsu replied, even though he was as convinced as Tadayo that these four should have received the letters.

—But even without counting them, there must be a few who received the secret message from the lord of Suruga and said nothing.

—I'm sure there will be.

—We must find, by all means, an confirmation of receipt sent to lord of Suruga.

—That's right.

The two of them stared into each other's eyes, with that obsessive, somewhat fearful look that comes from people with a reputation as strategists, and nodded to one another.

II

Tsugami Kuninosuke had just been hired to serve in the manor of Suruga barely half a year ago.

At the time he was a simple *ronin* who had stopped on the road to rest at the *dojo* Funaki Ichidensai had founded in the city. As far as Ichidensai could tell, Tsugami had considerable skill with the blade.

What he said, however, was that he knew a little about the *Itto* style, although when he put it into practice when facing the disciples of the *dojo*, it was clear that he did not know just "a little": it was clear that, despite his youth, he had mastered the essence of the sword to perfection. Although he only used the *Itto* style, he also showed complex and eccentric techniques, but when asked about it again he replied very humbly that he had learned a little on his own.

A few days after stopping at the *dojo*, Kuninosuke went to visit the Sengen shrine with a couple of the *dojo's* disciples, but when they reached Anzaicho they were met by an impressive obstacle.

All of this came out known later, but it was a burly, angry samurai of the clan named Tendo Kyuzaemon, who had suddenly lost his temper and killed a fellow student and was now making a big fuss. With the fearsome force of insanity, Tendo shook off those who tried to contain him and ran outside like lightning. Because of the unusual speed at which he was running, no one could catch up with him, and the people just shouted insults at him as he ran back and forth at an unbelievable speed. He attacked and knocked down two people who crossed his path before his eyes, and then he ran on with his sword held high and his eyes lost in the sky.

Seeing Tendo come running toward him, Kunisosuke immediately understood that he was a lunatic. Despite the haste of his companions to move aside, he calmly used the strap of his *katana* to tie his sleeves together, rolled up his *hakama*, and stopped to wait under the eaves of a nearby house.

As soon as he saw Tendo running past his eyes, Kuninosuke ran to his side, leaving a distance of about ten centimeters from Tendo's left side. He continued to run beside him for some time without being left a single step behind (even though it is said that the speed a lunatic reaches when running is twice that of a normal person). Finally, when he felt the time was right, he hit his right elbow on Tendo's left side.

Tendo, who had no eyes for anything other than what appeared in front of him, turned his head.

—Bastard! — he shouted in a shaky voice at the sight of Kuninosuke and, as he ran, he tried to strike his opponent with a sword, but instead came forward, as if his upper body had bent in half, and collapsed in a pool of blood.

Kuninosuke, in a single movement, had drawn and thrust his *katana* into Tendo's left flank and driven it through to his spine, cutting his torso in two.

After that, Kuninosuke was immediately summoned to the castle and hired for one hundred and twenty *oku* to serve under guard captain Matsudaira Shimanokami.

One morning, Tsugami Kuninosuke was in his quarters preparing to attend the castle when he heard his young servant Kusuke attending to someone in the hallway.

—I have come to bring you the guard for the *katana* you entrusted to me the other day, — said an unknown voice.

Hearing this, Kuninosuke hurried out into the hall, for he did not remember ordering such a thing.

He came upon a young, slim-looking man. He was dressed as someone from the castle town, but there was no doubt that he had just arrived from Edo. He put his thumb around the neck of the kimono and bowed down by bending half his body, a sign that Kuninosuke immediately understood to be an "urgent incognito messenger".

He accepted the small package and returned to his chambers. Once there he took the sword guard out of the package, cut it in half with a knife, and took out a piece of paper from inside. When he had finished reading it, he burned it in the fire that was lit on the side, wrapped the black ashes carefully in a paper napkin, and flushed it down the toilet.

He went to the castle with the same attitude as always, greeting everyone with a smile, until he noticed that in the garden overlooking the great hall there was a great commotion.

—Did something happen? — he asked a fellow student named Niida.

—Just a moment ago a suspicious fellow was caught hiding in the attic of the audience hall.

—Oh!

He walked over and saw that surrounded by a crowd a man was lying on the floor dressed in black with wounds on various parts of his body.

—I looked by chance and saw that this guy's foot was sticking out of the ventilation space above the lintel, so I didn't think about it and pulled it out, — explained a proud man named Kusumi for the umpteenth time, who was a bit shaken.

Kuninosuke peered out to look at the bloody face of the man lying in the

middle of the crowd. It was a completely unfamiliar face. It looked like he had been attacked in a group and stabbed to death. Now he was dying.

"Poor devil... he's messed up. What fiefdom could he be from?",

Kuninosuke thought as he looked at him, and his expression suddenly tensed. The reason was that the pitiful sighs the man exhaled had been transformed into the breath of "*ninja* communication".

—Fu... fuu... uuh... uuh... — to any observer's ears, they simply seemed to be the last sighs of someone in the twilight of his life, but in reality this was the method of communication characteristic of the province of Iga, where every sigh became a word. It was a device used to leave a final message, addressed to some ally who might be in hiding somewhere.

—To lord Sakai... tell him it is Suganuma Ukyo, — Kuninosuke could decipher. His lord would be another, but surely he was an Edo *ninja* as well. Kuninosuke was preparing to convey the message: "All right, take it easy", but just then someone cleared his throat among the samurai around him:

—Ahem... hum.

It was just the same message Kuninosuke was going to convey. While looking ahead, he put into practice the technique of "making the eyes float", and soon discovered the man who had cleared his throat with his eyes. In Koga they also called this method "gaze-free vigilance". The man who had coughed up this signal was the personal secretary of the feudal lord, Kojima Sozo.

"Him too?", Kuninosuke thought, somewhat surprised, and smirked, for he already had his suspicions about the man.

Despite being the personal secretary, he was rumored to be very skilled, and a few facts had come to his attention that testified to that. Kuninosuke became suspicious simply because, despite his skill, he was serving as a personal secretary. Also, as he watched him unnoticed, he already harbored a vague suspicion that he might be a colleague, but the doubt was cleared up unexpectedly. It was evident that he had not been sent by his master, Toshikatsu.

"Could it be lord Sakai, or lord Nagai? Or could it be lord Morikawa?"

As he returned to the small room thinking obsessively about it, in the inner courtyard near the guard room of the low-ranking samurai, he came face to face with Kojima Sozo himself. At the time, Kuninosuke intended to pass by as if nothing had happened but, as he passed him, Sozo whispered in his ear:

—You've got the smell of a smoke. You're so careless! — surprised, Kuninosuke felt a twinge in his chest. In his haste, after burning the

writing he had come to the castle without changing his clothes, and Sozo's keen sense of smell had caught the scent instantly.

—I hope you got rid of the ashes efficiently?

—Of course, — Kuninosuke quickly answered.

Sozo turned his head to look at him and added over his shoulder:

—Your eye surveillance... if you do not improve it, you will be found out eventually, — he said this, started to walk quickly and disappeared.

It was an action which, to anyone's eyes, simply seemed as if the two had crossed paths and exchanged a greeting and a couple of words.

"Who the hell is that guy? But, unfortunately, he's one step above me."

Kuninosuke returned to his post feeling that he had lost a point to his opponent. Whoever had sent him, it was comforting that such a man had come to Sunpu, and it also raised his enthusiasm and made him think that they could not possibly be defeated.

And then there could be still others. And the matter was not necessarily limited to those who had received orders from the shogunate, but there would surely be spies sent by various *daimyo* as well. Moreover, to counter them, there would most likely also be "hidden spies" from within the Sunpu Castle itself who, pretending to know nothing, would be probing people around them.

"I cannot afford the slightest oversight", Kuninosuke repeated to himself. Niida entered with a look of stupefaction, but said to him with his usual languidness:

—Tsugami, what a strange day today, huh? Someone else has just been killed.

—What?

—The maid who usually accompanies Kiku... a woman named Ai or something.

—Ai...?

—That's right, it seems her body was found on the banks of the Abe river. With a clean cut in the body. Yesterday morning she was granted a leave of absence, and left the castle not to return. Why would she have gone there? The inspector, Ramon, put the spy's corpse aside and went away.

Kuninosuke knew the servant Ai by face. She was said to be one of the most beautiful servants in the private rooms of the castle.

Perhaps it was jealousy? For the moment he opted for that motivation, which was what everyone thought, but strangely enough he harbored a doubt in one corner of his mind: he had a feeling that she had some connection to the spy he had just seen.

"What nonsense! It's just two events that happened on the same morning. They have nothing to do with me."

But no matter how hard he tried to deny it, he couldn't calm down. It seemed as if the painful thorn that Sozo had stuck in him had made his young soul destabilize.

At nightfall he left the castle and, after his sad, solitary dinner, went out through the garden into the open space behind it. The adjoining house a short distance away was the mansion of Kashima Jinzaemon, the chief falconer.

He stared there for a few moments, but since the figure of the person he was waiting to see did not appear, he returned to his chambers, ruminating. He was there when Kusuke came to announce that he had a visitor.

The visitor was Kojima Sozo.

—I have come because I thought that since you broke the code, there is no longer any need for secrecy between us, and that we could collaborate with each other, — Sozo explained quietly as Kuninosuke entered the room. There was a sort of forced smile on his pale, chiseled face, — Although our direct superior is not the same, it seems that our ultimate goal does coincide. The man from this morning only got me one name: Suganuma Ukyo, from the Kanu fief in Mino Province, of a hundred thousand *koku*. I also know the names of two other *daimyo* who sent an acknowledgement of receipt of the secret message from the lord of Suruga.

—I have just received this morning the order to investigate. To tell you the truth, other than Suganuma Ukyo, whose name I got by accident this morning, I have not yet discovered anyone else, — Kuninosuke replied frankly, somewhat annoyed.

—I am not lying to you. I received the order this morning as well. But thanks to my position as personal secretary, everything comes to my ears slightly faster, — he replied, clutching his thin right earlobe with a boastful expression, but his tone of voice changed abruptly.

Kuninosuke was silent.

—I suppose you have heard that the servant Ai has been murdered. I would like you to spread the word that you saw that woman walking along the banks of the Abe River accompanied by a man... a man who looked nothing like me.

—Did you kill her?

Sozo nodded coldly to Kuninosuke's question.

—I left without finishing her off when I noticed someone's presence. That was my oversight. You can see that before she died, with the blood that

flowed from her body, Ai wrote the syllable "Ko" on her palm. What a clever woman!

—Why did you take Ai to that place?

—She was my lover.

He knocked out a mosquito that flew up to his knee and stared at Kuninosuke's surprised face, as if to say, "What are you looking at?".

III

Kojima Sozo had been hired half a year before Kuninosuke.

His experience was quite limited, but it was said that he possessed extremely elegant and precise calligraphy, which is not surprising in the position of personal secretary. However, the rumors about Sozo that reached Kuninosuke's ears were about the martial arts, not related at all to the functions of his official position.

Soon after Kojima entered the service of the castle, there was a fight between two fellows who were in the same room as him. One of them suddenly drew his *katana* and attacked the other. Then Sozo, who was next to him, instantly threw the ink soaked brush at him and hit the man in the eye, blinding him, and without losing a moment caught him by the legs and threw him to the ground.

—Hey, you, stay out of this! — shouted the other man, and Sozo threw another brush into that mouth of his, then lunged at him, hit him hard on the wrist and threw the *katana* to the ground.

—We are inside the castle. Please, calm down, — Sozo scolded them calmly, as if nothing had happened.

The two men were knocked down and confused, for they were not quite sure what he had done to them, their blood had turned cold, and it seemed that they too had lost all strength to resist.

Another anecdote occurred shortly after this, when the lord of the castle, Tadanaga, was in the Sengen shrine grounds admiring the cherry blossoms. Taking advantage of his intoxication, Tadanaga suddenly removed a hairpin from his hair when the maid Ai bowed her head before his eyes to pour the sake and threw it with all her might. The hairpin flew out of the air like from a bow and got caught in the top of an old tree a distance away.

—Ha! Ai, bring me that hairpin, — Tadanaga commanded, showing once more his usual whimsical attitude.

He was the feudal lord, so when he ordered something, his orders had to be carried out no matter what. Ai blinked sadly, bowed, and went to the old

tree. A couple of people picked her up in their arms, she grabbed the lowest branch of the tree and began to climb higher and higher with determination.

Tadanaga watched attentively, with sadistic interest, the beautiful young girl, dressed in her best clothes, zigzagging among the branches, trembling and self-conscious, climbing from branch to branch while paying attention to the skirts of the Kimono.

Ai put her foot on a thin branch that looked as if it could bend even under the weight of a woman, and managed to retrieve the pin, but then the people who were watching from below began to shriek and ran off to the side.

A huge monkey that no one had seen appear was stalking Ai from a branch of an adjacent tree.

Mount Shizuhata, at the foot of which the Sengen shrine stands, was a place where it had been forbidden since ancient times, by the Buddhist beliefs, to hunt or kill animals, so more than a thousand monkeys had their habitat there without harm. They were so used to people that occasionally they even received food from the hands of visitors to the shrine. However, in November of the previous year, on Tadanaga's whim, a hunt was organized on the mountain and more than twelve hundred monkeys were killed. After that, the monkeys that survived the hunt were rarely seen, and when one appeared, it always showed violent hostility towards humans, even to the point of hurting them.

The terrible expression of the huge monkey that stalked Ai also oozed with restlessness and fury. The distance between them was no more than three meters. With a simple jump, the monkey could sink his teeth into Ai.

At the shouts of his companions, Ai raised his head and saw the monkey. Seeing the monkey's horrifying face, Ai lost consciousness and let go. It looked as if he would fall to the ground and break her bones, but Kojima Sozo, who flew like a bird from the corner of the curtains installed to protect the courtship from the wind, caught her body.

Almost at the same time, the massive monkey gave a strange scream and fell to the ground. Without letting go of Ai, whom he was hugging with his right arm, Sozo approached the monkey, which was writhing desperately and trying to escape, and struck it down with a blow: he had stuck Ai's pointed pin, which had served as an instrument of self-defense, into the monkey's forehead, right down to the bottom.

—With your skill of martial arts, why don't you serve me? I'll put you in any position you like, — Tadanaga suggested, in a good mood.

Sozo prostrated himself before the great lord and explained that until he had a thorough understanding of the martial arts he intended to continue to serve him with the brush he had inherited from his father. Tadanaga laughed and thought that Sozo was a strange fellow. For the time being he gave him three gold pieces as a reward, but soon after that he was promoted from simple secretary to personal secretary and his stipend was increased by fifty *koku*. How and since when Sozo had come to establish such a special relationship with the maid Ai, of course, would be known only to the two of them.

—It is a rather naive story, — Sozo said of the secret, then explained it all to Kuninosuke.

Immediately after the banquet of the cherry blossoms, Sozo sent Ai the gold that Tadanaga had rewarded him with a note: "In compensation for the hairpin". In reply, he received a love letter from Ai.

But it wasn't that Ai was a woman especially in love, she also had her own motivations. She had received secret orders from Asakura Nobumasa, the provincial governor of Chikugo. She was to identify those charges that she found suspicious, and she was to extend this mission beyond the confines of the scenario she had been given, that is, the private chambers of the court.

A secretary who excelled in the martial arts attracted a lot of attention and that gave him cause for suspicion. Or so Ai said to herself to convince herself. But in reality it was perhaps more accurate to say that it was all because this attractive secretary, who had saved her by defeating the monkey with her own pin, had touched her heart.

Whatever the motivation, it was what happens whenever a beautiful woman and a handsome man meet alone, that they end up giving themselves carnally to each other.

Seeing the course things were taking, Ai felt that she could no longer deceive herself about her true feelings.

"I love that man", admitted Ai after thinking clearly about her own feelings. Unable to help herself, she was answering everything she knew to the questions Sozo was asking her. After saying goodbye, she often regretted having revealed certain things to him, but when the two of them were alone, the Sozo with whom she exchanged sweet words was so tender that he even seemed to be a different person from the usual frowning man, and his manner of speaking was so ingenious that in the end, without realizing it, she ended up confessing everything to her.

"But there is not a single piece of evidence that proves he is a spy. Because of his position, in one way or another he has knowledge of things through

colleagues that are essential to his professional success", she told herself, but suddenly she became afraid and felt the need to check Sozo's personal story, not on behalf of Asakura Nobumasa, but for her own good.

In the midst of the darkness on the banks of the Abe River, amidst the lush susuki grass, they forgot everything and gave themselves over completely to "flirting". Later, as she watched Sozo completely exhausted and lying on his back with his eyes closed, Ai extended her hand stealthily. She made it seem as if she was going to stroke Sozo's hair, but in reality he was just trying to inspect his hairstyle. If he was a *ninja*, he would have a long, cylindrical object, slightly thicker than the rest of his hair, hidden in the hair he wore on his crown; his affiliation and full name would be recorded within it.

When he noticed this attempt, Sozo reacted immediately.

—What are you doing? — he shouted at her. His terrible look had nothing to do with the person who had been talking to her in a sweet voice only a moment before, — You gave me your body so that you could look into mine. That was your plan, wasn't it?

—No, you are wrong, that is not it, — Ai replied, retreating with a cry that mixed fear and regret, — I really love you.

At Ai's desperate cries, Sozo seemed to hesitate for a brief moment, but soon he grabbed the hilt of his *katana*, cut horizontally, and Ai groaned and fell over.

—That woman was a counter-spy, — after concluding his story, Sozo looked up at Kuninosuke and forced a bitter smile, — But... maybe she really was in love with me.

—So why did you kill her? How could you be so cruel?

—A woman who immediately loses her head to one man could be seduced by another at any time and betray me. Well, leaving that aside, I ask you the favour I told you about before.

—Mmm... I guess I can do it... — Kuninosuke replied reluctantly.

—I need your help on another matter as well. It's about Fusa, the daughter of your neighbor Kashima Jinzaemon...

—What?

—I would like her to be my wife. You seem to have confidence in Kashima, so you could ask for me.

—Marry... Miss Fusa? Have you lost your mind? Are you thinking about marriage, when you don't know when you will have to hide?

—I need a woman to take Ai's place. That Miss Fusa has a good reputation

in the castle and it seems that she is an intelligent woman, so for the moment it would not be bad to have her as a fiancée. That's why I'm asking you.

—Well, I refuse.

—Why?

—I know Miss Fusa, and I won't help you to make her unhappy under my nose.

—Huh! — on the ridge of Sozo's long thin nose two deep vertical wrinkles formed. When they disappeared, a sort of mocking smile flew across his face from his eyes to his cheeks, but he glared ominously into Kuninosuke's eyes and continued, — You're not in love with that girl? Kuninosuke's breath was cut short by the feeling that Sozo had pointed out clearly what was deep in his heart, but his youth gave his pupils, which had begun to falter, strength to face the challenge head on.

—That is not your concern.

—It does concern me, very much so. If you say you won't ask for me, it's because she's the woman you're in love with... Tsugami, the first principle of the *ninja* is to stay away from love, desire, feelings, anger, sadness and pleasure. Haven't you forgotten that?

—Getting away from feelings doesn't mean you have to be heartless.

—In some cases it's the same thing.

Even compared to your own experience, you couldn't deny that it was. Kuninosuke felt blocked and had no choice but to admit that as far as the theory was concerned he had been defeated, but he felt something inside that ignored the theory and put up a reckless fight.

—Anyway, I refuse, — Kuninosuke repeated again, immediately wielding the sword beside him and jumping back, for he had noticed that Sozo had reached out for the *katana*, — Do you intend to kill me?

The two men held swords firmly in each other's hands and cast murderous glances at one another. They spent several seconds in the atmosphere that made their veins beat visibly, clutched with tension.

—We cannot go on with this, — Sozo whispered and withdrew his hand from the hilt of his sword, — We would injure each other. Let's leave it at that for now. But if you let your passion get the better of you and forget your mission, it doesn't just affect you. It could endanger us, and all the other comrades who might be there. In that case, I'll kill you.

—I'm not the one who's forgotten about his mission.

—That's what they all say... — Sozo got up, but before he left he smiled coldly at Kuninosuke, — Finally, I want to ask you one thing: have you slept with Fusa yet?

—What are you saying? Miss Fusa doesn't know anything.

—Come on, does my question surprise you? It's not like you're still a teenager. Ha, ha, ha! What a surprise. You mean I'm unrivaled? Then I will propose to Fusa without any qualms. Since you won't help me, don't be mean and spoil it for me either.

IV

The next day, in the gazebo of the vast garden inside Sunpu Castle, Tadanaga's advisor Asakura Nobumasa and Kuriyama Daizen, advisor to the Kuroda clan, who was on his way to Edo and had stopped by for a brief visit, stood facing one another.

—How hot is the weather! We were roasted in my village this year as well, but it cannot last forever.

Daizen opened his clothing slightly, exposing his chest without any embarrassment, and vigorously flapped his fan. Aside from being a long-time acquaintance of Nobumasa, he was also a very capable and stubborn man, and was referred to as the Kuriyama of the Kuroda, as were the Kuroda of Kuriyama. His lord, Tadayuki, was also extremely uncomfortable in his presence, but when it came to negotiations outside, he trusted no one but Daizen.

As he fanned out noisily and stared at the grass that seemed to be burning in the sun, Daizen spoke out again:

—At an inn in Nagoya, I learned through a secret message from my lord Tadayuki of the other day's circular, — as he suddenly entered the subject matter, Nobumasa simply nodded and looked at it sideways, without even turning to him, so Daizen continued, — When the honorable great advisor finds himself in great distress, he will surely ask you for help, — he continued, — Asakura, naturally Tadayuki will never forget the kindness the honorable great advisor showed him in the past. Without a doubt... — at this point, he looked Nobumasa in the eye and a quiet laugh escaped him.

Nobumasa nodded and looked as if he was going to start saying something, but Daizen interrupted him, — Did you hear that last month Doi from the kitchens sent out circulars conspiring in favor of our honorable great advisor?

—The kitchen manager is a faithful servant of the shogunate, but now he has done something that has displeased them and so he has devised this cunning ploy, but it will not succeed.

—And in the case of your circular, who has sent an acknowledgement of receipt? — Nobumasa looked away and only laughed under his breath, so Daizen tried to pressure him by suggesting names.

—Because of that incident, he will not be anymore invited.

"That incident" referred to the previous year, when a vassal of Shimazu got angry because he had been bitten by Tadanaga's favorite dog and killed the animal.

Tadanaga became very angry, confronted the Shimazu clan, and muddled the situation further, but through the mediation of Doi Toshikatsu the matter calmed down somewhat.

—And Mori? Since the battle of Sekigahara, he has become a real coward.

—And the both Kato?

Nobumasa looked at Daizen and began to say:

—Leaving that aside, the Lord Governor of Chikuzen Province, Kuroda Tadayuki...

Daizen interrupted him, however, making a face of not knowing anything:

—And from inside the fief, who would be involved?

—They are all trusted vassals.

—And Torii?

—If he would've been found out, he would panic and make a fuss. To this virtuous man, let us give half a year more.

—Saegusa?

—He is, mostly, very clever, but at his heart he is an idiot, — Nobumasa commented, apparently annoyed, and returned to the subject he had begun a moment ago with determination, — I will meet Tadayuki and send him to you immediately.

"You old fox! He's not going to give it to me just like that. He is playing both sides," — Nobumasa mumbled irritably behind Daizen's back, who had already said goodbye and was leaving, but it was better not to make him angry.

That was the great key that would decide the fate of the Kuroda clan.

Though he understood that they were navigating between two waters, he had no choice but to work hard to finally bring them to his side. From his perspective, this conspiracy to overthrow the government seemed the only way out of the impasse over the fate of his young lord Tadanaga.

Moreover, his lord's fate was also his own.

Sacrificing someone coldly and without remorse, no matter how much that person was his blood, in order to maintain the safety of the head of the Tokugawa clan had been traditional policy since Ieyasu. It was for this reason that Ieyasu murdered his wife, lady Tsukiyama, and forced his

eldest son Nobuyasu to do a *seppuku*. Rumor has it that he poisoned his second son Hideyasu and sent his son, Tadanao, into exile. And that Tadateru, his sixth son, had his fiefdom taken away from him and forced him to shave his head and become a monk.

His successor Hidetada sacrificed his own daughter, Senhime, and murdered Yodogimi — the sister of his wife, whom he loved ardently — and Senhime's husband, Hideyori.

Even the docile Yoshinao²⁵, lord of Owari, and the upright Yorinobu²⁶, lord of Kii, trembled at the suspicion of rebellion they often received and showed their unwavering obedience to the *shogun*.

There was no reason to believe that Iemitsu would stand idly by Tadanaga, who had overshadowed him from childhood and shown some inclination to threaten his position. No matter how humbly Tadanaga served him as a perfect vassal, an unlucky day could drag him into the depths of destruction on any pretext. Especially when it came to the arrogant and dissolute Tadanaga. Such destruction would inevitably come in the near future. With these arguments, Nobumasa had convinced himself of the need to take a chance and go into the lion's den. Instigating Tadanaga was easier than manipulating a child.

Everything that had been done for a few years had this objective: among the *daimyo* who passed through the Tokaido route on their way to or from Edo, they were granted favors. The samurai who had been left without a lord to serve, but who had a reputation as experts in martial arts, despite being aware that they were on the side of the shogunate, were hired. They often visited the shrine on Mount Kuno and fortified in their minds the plan to usurp the nearly two million in gold coins that had been stored there. The gunsmiths of the village of Kunitomo, in Omi Province, were forced to emigrate.

Ultimately, they had to ask the *tozama daimyos*, who were not on good terms with the Tokugawa shogunate, for their support. It was necessary to know the names of those who, when the time came, would rise up under Tadanaga.

Those who finally took the risk and responded to the letter of invitation to participate in the rebellion that had been sent to them were far less than expected. Nobumasa felt that they must succeed at all costs in making Kuroda and the both Kato allies. So when he had Daizen before his eyes

²⁵ Ninth son of Tokugawa Ieyasu, lord of Owari Province and founder of the main branch of the Tokugawa family (Owari-Tokugawa branch)

²⁶ Tenth son of Tokugawa Ieyasu, lord of Kii Province and founder of the Kii branch of the Tokugawa family.

he turned his face away two or three times, as if to shake off the mysterious oppression he felt constantly.

"He is but the advisor to Kuroda, a provincial samurai", he thought, but whenever he met Daizen he felt something overwhelming and unwittingly became the submissive servant of his interlocutor, and he found it extremely uncomfortable to recognize himself in such a situation.

"At every turn, this guy is risking everything he has, but what about me", Nobumasa thought with a twinge in his stomach, and he felt blood rushing to his cheeks.

Kuriyama Daizen was approaching the main gate of the castle, accompanied by Sone Masatomo, the director of the stables, but when he saw that in the courtyard to the right a gang of riflemen was doing target practice, he stopped and watched carefully. Soon he was walking slowly towards the head of the riflemen, Kenmochi Jisuke.

—An excellent rifle! May I have a look at it? — he said. After receiving the rifle he inspected it in detail.

—It's of Tobee's doing, sir, — Kenmochi Jisuke reported, short and round-faced, looking up at Daizen's face.

—No way, it's a fake, — Daizen replied as he returned the rifle, but when he saw that Kenmochi had a mole on his cheek that grew two long hairs, he smiled and grabbed them between the tips of two fingers, — They are hairs of happiness.

Kenmochi smiled casually at him as well.

"With those hands you can already charm people", whispered Sone Masatomo as he watched the scene. When he finally escorted Daizen out of the castle, he returned inside and introduced himself to Nobumasa, who had already returned to the large tatami hall.

—Do you already have a lead on Ai's murderer? — Nobumasa asked, turning his head at Sone's entrance as he recalled the matter. He was cutting his nails thoroughly with a pair of small scissors and had not yet gotten Daizen out of his head.

—Based on the syllable "Ko", there are Kojima, Koyama, Koshimura, Kogure, Koizumi Ramon said to start there.

—It wasn't a crime of passion. If you're attached to a woman, you can't end it so drastically. I'm afraid it was because someone smelled Ai. Kojima would seem the most suspicious...

—I'm of the same opinion. Now, last night someone dropped a letter between my home and Naito's mansion, saying that Ai's killers were either Tsugami Kuninosuke or Ishida Bunzo. As for the syllable "Ko" written on Ai's palm, we cannot simply assume that it was necessarily written by her

before she died. It could also have been written by the assassin to deflect suspicion.

—You're right. Tsugami or Ishida... both have something to be suspected of. But, to begin with...

—If it's between those two, I'll go for Tsugami.

—That's right.

—But, whether it was Kojima or Tsugami, we don't have any conclusive evidence anyway.

—Which of the two would beat the other? I don't know.

—It would seem to be a draw... but I think Kojima is possibly above us precisely because he hides his claws.

—We should get Kojima to kill Tsugami.

—I see.

—Tell Saegusa. Let's include them both in next month's duel-to-the-death tournament.

—And when Kojima's killed Tsugami?

—If he's innocent, we'll leave it at that. If he turns out to be the suspect, he'll be happy to kill Tsugami, and then the dirt will surely start coming out. In that case, it'll never be too late to punish him.

—Right.

—Kojima and Tsugami... maybe it's a duel between spies. What an interesting confrontation! — satisfied with the idea that had just occurred to him, Nobumasa laughed out loud.

V

—You have been discovered, Tsugami, — announced Sozo to Kuninosuke as soon as he sat down. Today I have been summoned by Sone Masamoto, Asakura Nobumasa's right hand man. I have been informed that Tsugami Kuninosuke is suspected of murdering Ai and is also a spy for Edo. I have been ordered to kill you on the occasion of the next dueling tournament, using that duel as a pretext.

—How can there be any suspicion that I've killed Ai?

—Ha-ha-ha! It was me who gave you away.

—What?!

—It was quite likely that I, Koyama, Koshimura, or Kogure were being investigated... so I wrote a letter saying that Ai's murderer was either you or Ishida, and then I threw the letter into Sone's house. I guess I was getting more and more confused and didn't know what to do anymore. Ha-ha-ha!

Kuninosuke had been stunned by the impassive attitude of Sozo, who to save himself had placed a fellow spy in a dangerous situation, and he was speechless as he watched the pale, cold face of his interlocutor as he continued to brag about his action:

—But if, between the two names, they have their eye on yours, it will be because they were suspicious before.

Seeing that Sozo did not seem to regret the reckless action he had taken, Kuninosuke became so angry that he was unable to utter a word of reproof.

—Tsugami, what if you were to vanish?

—Fool! Can I run away with the blame for the false accusation of killing an innocent woman?

—Have you forgotten your mission as a spy?

—I may be a spy... but I'm a samurai first and foremost.

—Then I will kill you without hesitation, on the day of the duel.

—It won't be so easy for you to kill me.

As far as preparation as a spy was concerned, Kuninosuke recognized that Sozo was certainly one step ahead of him, but as far as the martial arts of samurai were concerned, he did not think himself inferior. It was this self-confidence, coupled with dislike for his opponent, that had led him to respond so decisively.

—Heh heh heh. It is ridiculous: two people who have the same objective fall into the enemy's trap and kill each other.

—Then, Kojima, you could be the one to disappear.

—I still have something to investigate.

—Same.

—But now that they suspect you, it will be difficult for you, Tsugami, — Sozo hinted with a broad smile and altered tone of voice.

—Could it be that you're worried about Fusa and that's why you can't leave?

—Shut up, don't mention Miss Fusa.

—I see that you are deeply in love. You are so young! But it's not a good idea. If I end up killing you, that would be the end of it. And if you killed me, since you are already suspected of spying, you couldn't stay here for long. And what would you do with Fusa when that time came?

Once Sozo had left after urging time and time again, as one in a position of superiority, Kuninosuke to come to his senses, Tsugami stood petrified in front of the garden, where the sun was already beginning to set, thinking about the situation.

Sozo was right. Under the circumstances, it was safest for his allies that he

should disappear from Sunpu castle as soon as possible, and that was what his spying wisdom told him to do.

From those who had delivered Tadanaga's secret message, he had already been able to identify Suganuma Ukyo and Horio Tadaharu. Moreover, from the sudden visit of Kuriyama Daizen, it could be deduced that the Kuroda clan had to be added to the list as well. If he were to return with these few, albeit insufficient, results, he could at least complete his mission for the time being.

Right now, however, he was not capable of leaving Sunpu for anything in the world.

Kuninosuke repeated himself that it was because his warrior spirit longed to face Sozo, but as he probed deeper, his greatest concern was what ruse Sozo would use Fusa once he was gone.

In his mind swirled Fusa's eyes, whose long eyelashes seemed to be always wet with dew. The shy, innocent expression on her face when, in contrast, her cheeks, white porcelain, were dyed crimson. Her young, vital body that oozed from the ends of the tightly woven cloth... and appeared to him in the darkness of the evening.

"I can't stand a guy like Sozo groping Fusa!"

Unconsciously he gritted his teeth, put on his wooden sandals that he used in the garden and went out into the open through the back door. Near the back door of the Kashima family mansion there was a sagging silhouette, shoulders slumped over.

Involuntarily, Kuninosuke's chest roared, and then that silhouette ran across the open space toward him and stopped his steps in front of Kuninosuke's chest. The woman's lips trembled, and the sleeves of her kimono, which she had worn to her chest to control herself and her heartbeat, swayed violently.

According to the official regulations for servants in the private chambers of the castle, she could be absent only twice a year, but she always used some excuse and generally managed to leave approximately once a month. And each of those times she would show up near the back door as if by chance, and exchange just a few words with Kuninosuke, who would show up in the same manner. That was the way the girl could express all her love for him.

This time, however, her expression was entirely different. She had come running to him as if she were throwing herself into his arms and her thin lips were desperately searching for a way to express what she had to say. —Miss Fusa, what happened? — Kuninosuke asked hurriedly, surprised

by the unusual expression on her face and overwhelmed by the exquisite scent of young women that intoxicated him.

—Kuninosuke, just a moment ago my father received a proposal from the personal secretary Kojima Sozo, who wishes to marry me.

As she finished speaking, as if she was suddenly ashamed of her indecent attitude in addressing Kuninosuke just to inform him of it, her cheeks suddenly blushed and she bowed her head. The area where her white neck disappeared into the neck of the kimono showed both virginal purity and indescribable sensuality.

—Kojima has... — Kuninosuke could not escape his amazement.

"Just today... How quickly! He doesn't waste any time..."

—That's right. My father said: "He's an admirable man. How would you like it if we accepted?"

—Miss Fusa, what about you...? — said Kuninosuke impetuously. Neither of them realized that Kuninosuke had placed his left hand on Fusa's shoulder and was holding it tightly.

—Kuninosuke... — it was the only thing Fusa ever said, looking up, and then she pressed her lips together tightly.

The response was obvious.

An immense, deep joy ran through Kuninosuke's body, throbbing. As soon as he knew that he had succeeded in attracting the heart of the woman he desired, and that he had been chosen by her, he felt that emotion of intense joy that engulfs all men in such cases, a grandiose mixture of pride and satisfaction that cuts to the bone.

Fusa's eyes seemed to confirm this feeling, for round tears began to flow from them, running down her nose and falling to the ground.

—Miss Fusa...

Kuninosuke ran both hands behind her back and held her against his chest.

Fusa, pressing her cheek against Kuninosuke's chest, whose heartbeat resonated with surprising clarity, whispered in complete conviction:

—Kuninosuke, will you go and ask my father for my hand?

Though he felt a twinge in his chest, he immediately made an evasive response with ease, even to his own surprise.

—I cannot.

—Why?

—Because I have to duel Kojima Sozo.

—What?

—For certain reasons, I have been ordered to face Kojima in the next dueling tournament before the lord of the castle. But Fusa, do not worry, I will not be defeated, — as he looked into the woman's wide-open eyes,

brimming with an infinite confidence that exceeded all logic simply because he was the man she loved, his fighting spirit was inflamed.

"Without a doubt, I'm going to kill that Sozo. Besides, what to do with Fusa is no problem, as I can run away with her. Depending on the situation, I can give up my spying and my social status as a samurai."

Even such thoughts came to Kuninosuke's mind at that moment, as he held Fusa's tender, soft, fragrant body tightly against his chest.

In the midst of that now-darkened environment, the white face of the woman seemed to float like the petal of a huge flower. With his right hand, Kuninosuke gently lifted her face to kiss her lips, but before he could do so he gave a shout, protected Fusa by holding her behind his back, and in a single movement drew and raised his *katana*.

A metallic sound was heard, and a dagger flew out of the air and struck the ground about ten or fifteen feet in front of them.

—Who is there?

As he protected Fusa with his right arm, the same one with which he wielded the *katana*, Kuninosuke seemed to take a couple of steps backwards, but then he suddenly raised his left hand and from it flew something small into the darkness before him. He then looked up and set out to scan the mass of darkness.

The opponent was holding his breath, completely hiding his location, but since Fusa was there, he could not do the same. In that considerably disadvantaged position, Kuninosuke again held an object tightly in his left hand and continued to scan the darkness before him.

The tense atmosphere and fear became so unbearable that Fusa's body began to shake and tremble, but just then Kuninosuke sighed with relief and relaxed his own body.

—He escaped, — Kuninosuke proclaimed. His back was covered with sweat.

A half hour after that, Kojima Sozo found himself in his chamber watching and turning over a flat, star-shaped object he held in his palm. It was a pinwheel-shaped *shuriken* with eight sharp points.

As it was thrown, the fearsome *shuriken* gained speed as it spun and as it stuck one of its eight points into the opponent's flesh, it continued to rotate a couple of times, embedded itself in the flesh and even cut through the bone.

"So it was he who uses the crosscutting blow of the windmill..."

He had heard that among his fellow spies in Edo was one who had superb skill in the use the windmill *shuriken*. That cruciform attack consisted of throwing six *shurikens* at his opponent so that they would stick into him, without leaving a single gap, from his right shoulder to his left hip, and another six to stick into him from his left shoulder to his right hip, forming a cross. According to them, these were pitches that were impossible to dodge and caused the certain death of the opponent.

And it was none other than Tsugami Kuninosuke who mastered such exquisite technique.

Sozo had been horrified by the sight of the *shuriken* that had been thrust into his blade guard. He recognized the capabilities of the opponent he had previously been disparaging, and for the first time he experienced a strong sense of panic.

VI

As explained in detail in the *Secret Record of the Great Chancellor of Suruga*, on the twenty-fourth of September of the sixth year of the Kan'ei era (1629) a tournament of duels to the death, abominable in the extreme, was held in the southern courtyard of the interior of the Sunpu Castle in the honourable presence of Tadanaga, the lord of the castle.

The inclusion in the evening part of the tournament of the duel between Kojima Sozo and Tsugami Kuninosuke, between whom there seemed to be no connection at all, came as a great surprise to the entire fief.

There were those who whispered that they had asked to duel because of a grudge over the love of Kashima's daughter. There were also those who whispered with a satisfied look that it was an indirect punishment for Tsugami, who had been ordered to duel because he was suspected of Ai's murder.

Many spectators, after the violent clashes of the morning, had lost the courage to continue watching the tournament and had left; in particular, almost all the women had disappeared. Probably most of them were not able to digest their lunch.

Instead, there were men whose desire for brutality was further aroused by the stench of blood, and who were excited by the pleasure of seeing atrocities. These men concentrated again around the enclosure surrounded by the curtains, filled with a new interest and curiosity.

Replacing the morning referees was Sone Masatomo and the guard captain Nogata Kyuzaemon. For some unknown reason, behind them waited the captain of the riflemen, Kenmochi Jisuke.

As soon as they saw the first attack from the two swordsmen, left and right apart, Sone and Nogata opened their eyes wide and exchanged glances, for they already anticipated that the manner of fighting of these two opponents would be completely different than that exhibited by the swordsmen in all the other morning duels.

It seemed clear that Sozo was going to cut his opponent on the right shoulder, but instead he lowered his blade to the left; at the first hint, it seemed that Kuninosuke would dodge the blow by moving to the left, but instead his body jumped to the right. It looked as if both blades would collide with each other's bodies, but the next moment the two had sneaked apart, leaving a distance of fifteen or fifteen feet, and both had altered their position somehow.

The ability to guess the opponent's intent one thousandth of a second before he actually moves and faces him, along with the ability to change position quickly, at such a speed that it is impossible to keep track, was precisely the *raison d'être* of the *ninja*.

The struggle between these two adversaries, who knew the secrets of *ninja* techniques, seemed to everyone (starting with inspectors Sone and Nogata, and including all the spectators who crowded the enclosure) as enigmatic as two meteorites fluttering in the sky.

—What a strange starting position!

—When you follow them with your eyes, it feels like a spell of dizziness.

Surrounded by whispers of this kind, they crossed each other in the air again and again like swallows, and attacked each other like hawks.

Suddenly, as if they had suddenly come to an agreement, they both stopped in their tracks on the white sand. Sozo pointed his blade at their opponent's eyes, while Kuninosuke held his up high over his head.

But Kuninosuke's stance was different from the usual position of holding the sword high with arms apart. His was the "in-womb" stance: arms together in front of the face and the edge of the sword raised vertically.

It was a definitive position, in which the enemy could not see his eyes, but only caught a glimpse of his nose between his arms; thus concealing his intention with the sword, he took advantage of the opponent's confusion and struck a single blow that decided between life and death.

It looked as if that blow would be the death knell, but in the blink of an eye Sozo stepped back a few feet, raised his left hand suddenly above his head and three *shuriken* flew out, describing an arrow of light, into Kuninosuke's chest — but the only ones who noticed it were the two inspectors. The rest of the onlookers did not realize it until Kuninosuke nimbly repelled them one after another with his blade.

—Oh, they're *ninja* stars! — shouted the audience when they finally saw them.

Sozo, after seeing how none of the weapons he had thrown with murderous intent hit the target, tried to narrow the gap between them in anticipation of his opponent's counterattack, but then Kuninosuke quickly retreated seven or eight yards. Sozo turned his body left and right like a maniac.

A few seconds passed...

With no one having the slightest idea what had happened, suddenly an expression of intense pain appeared on Sozo's face and his body stiffened. He had several *shuriken* shaped like grinders deeply embedded in his left shoulder and left hip bone. The intense pain caused him to spasm all over his body.

Resisting as best he could, and without taking his eye off Kuninosuke, Sozo's lips moved slightly.

"You have defeated me", gestured his lips.

Long before lip-reading was used in communication between deaf-mutes, the technique of communicating by moving the lips without making a sound and lip-reading to get the message from the speaker was practiced among *ninja*.

A faint smile spread across Kuninosuke's face. He lowered his blade and moved closer to Sozo.

"You have defeated me. As a final gift before I die, I will tell you the result of my investigations", Sozo called out as if he had lost all his fighting spirit already but with his sword on guard to show the others that the duel was continuing. It seemed to be consuming his last strength to stand despite the pain.

"Apart from Kuroda, Sugenuma and Horio, Gamo Tadahiro has presented an acknowledgement, and also..."

"Ah! Gamo and Kato, too?", surprised at the content of those silent words, Kuninosuke kept his eye on Sozo's lips, which were already trembling so much that it was impossible for him to vocalize the following words properly, "Kojima, hold on! Who else?"

Kuninosuke stepped forward and approached him while gesturing those words with his lips. But then Sozo suddenly let out a scream that opened his mouth so wide that it looked as if it was going to fall apart, and Kuninosuke collapsed forward. His torso was bathed in the blood streaming from his shoulder and he was left motionless.

Everyone in the courtyard was stunned by the unexpected outcome, but what surprised them even more was the slaughter that was to follow.

—Victory goes to the west side's challenger, Kojima Sozo!

After he was proclaimed the winner, a wobbly Sozo headed for the curtain to retire, but then Kenmochi Jisuke shot him in the back with the rifle he held in his hands and it passed through with a single bullet.

The spectators rioted and there were shouts of surprise, but soon the thundering voice of Sone Masatomo echoed in their ears, so powerful that it spread to the front door of the castle.

—Calm down, everyone. This has been a punishment to a spy.

VII

Several days later, a short round-faced samurai walked through the huge black gate at the entrance to the residence of the Kuroda *daimyo* in Edo, just outside the castle in the Sakurada area of the Kasumigaseki district. He showed his permission, passed the guard guarding the entrance to the garden and quickly made his way to the study that was located right next to the large tatami room. As he reached the study he poked his head out and waved:

—Lord Kuriyama?

In an instant, the resounding figure of Daizen appeared.

—Are you back already? You can come in.

—Okay, — he entered the room and waved again, — First of all, the most important thing: the report.

—Yes.

—The Katos (Kato Tadahiro and Kato Akinari), Gamo, Horio, Ikoma... only these.

—So few?

—That's right. The recipients of the circular were twenty-two.

—As far as I know, in terms of weapons, the fiefdom has three hundred and twenty rifles and three cannons...

—That's right, sir.

—And what is the attitude of the vassals?

—Nobody knows anything yet. But, except for the newly hired ones, the vast majority have been chosen from the second or third sons of the *hatamoto*²⁷, so in my opinion, they would disagree in time.

—And what about the shogunate's spies?

—Let's say there are at least ten. Three have been killed.

—You've come back safe and sound, huh?

²⁷ Samurai in the direct service of the Tokugawa shogunate, who had the privilege of being received in audience by the shogun.

—Thanks to these lucky hairs, — the man pulled the tips of his fingers from the hair growing out of a mole on his cheek and laughed.

—Good job. You can get some rest.

Said that, Daizen withdrew, but only half an hour later preparations began quickly for the departure of the lord of the manor, Kuroda Tadayuki.

Tadayuki introduced himself to Sakai Tadayo, a member of the council of elders of the *shogun*, handed him Tadanaga's secret message and informed him of what Daizen had told him.

—I received this letter in my home province. Since I have moved to my residence in Edo today, I have come to deliver it to you as quickly as I can.

—Recently another secret message circulated with the same contents signed by Doi Toshikatsu. Although you came to deliver it to me immediately on that occasion as well, does it not seem to you that some people are usurping the name of the Lord of Suruga on this occasion?

—It may be so.

—Chikuzen Provincial Governor, I believe you met with the Lord of Suruga on your way to this hearing. Do you remember anything specific about that occasion?

—Well, the great advisor told me that when there is no way to proceed, at worst, he trusts his allies completely. And I offered him in reply that when the honorable great advisor is in great distress because of mutiny, and someone who rebels against the shogunate manifests himself, I, as general of the advisor to Suruga, must know when the time has come to face the rebel and, without a single word, do my work on my horse.

"Tch... how well he has slipped away", thought the director of the traditional music ministry with a bitter smile, his eyes following Tadayuki's back as he left.

In the ninth year of the Kan'ei era (1632), shortly after the death of the retired *shogun* Hidetada, Kato Tadahiro was stripped of his position and then the Gamu, Horio and Sugenuma families disappeared. Several years later, both Hori Naosada and Kato Akinari suffered the same misfortune, as has been recorded in history.

Tadanaga's fate is also known to all. But it is said that the one who was instrumental in the shogunate's punishment of Tadanaga was Asakura Nobumasa. Seeing the complicated way things were going, to save his own skin, at the last moment he attributed the entire plan to Tadanaga and secretly accused him before the cabinet of shogunate officials. Whether this is true or not is a mystery.

HIRYUKEN YABURETARI

(«The defeat of the flying dragon sword»)

I

Usually, when people talk about the *Nito* ("Two Swords") school of the way to the sword, everyone thinks of Miyamoto Musashi's *Enmei* style. However, it is documented that in the early Kan'ei era, in addition to the *Enmei* style, another faction of the *Nito* style, based in the city of Kai and a technique called "*Mirai-chishin* style" ("Knowing the Future"), also gained great popularity.

Even in the work "*Collection of the History of Fencing*", this school cannot be clearly distinguished: "It is like the *Nito* style, but it does not come from Musashi". Moreover, after the death of its founder, Kuroe Gotaro Muneyuki, it quickly went into decline.

Compared to the *Enmei* style, which after Musashi's death spread widely throughout Kyushu and produced great experts (Murakami Heinai, Shikada Yazaemon and Tsuda Iwata in Higo Province, Otsuka Noboru in Chikuzen Province, Dayu and Yazaemon Sekihira in Hizen, among others), the contrast is evident.

Much later, Sugimura Heima, the priest at the Kasuga Shinto shrine in Hizen, taught a style of *Nito* that followed in the footsteps of the *Mirai-chishin* style, which he called *Onko-chishin* ("Learning from the Past"), but the people of that time settled the argument by assuming that that style was simply descended from Musashi.

The cause of the decline of the *Mirai-chishin* style, as everyone knows, was that its founder, Kuroe Gotaro, faced Kataoka Kyonosuke of the Nikaido school as part of the duel-to-the-death tournament held at Suruga Castle in the presence of the feudal lord, where he was defeated and lost his life.

As Kataoka Kyonosuke later explained, despite the fact that he was a swordsman renowned for his wonderful skills thanks to the initial stance characteristic of his *Tareito* style ("Hanging Thread"), until the day of the match virtually no one was betting that he could defeat Kuroe Gotaro. Before the duel, Kuroe himself, convinced of his own abilities, often proclaimed his victory assured. Furthermore, in contrast to Kataoka's sword technique that was, so to speak, conservative and passive, Kuroe's tactics were as forceful as a thunderstorm, so in the case of a duel with real

swords, it seemed that the odds of victory were up to ninety percent in his favor.

When he died, Gotaro was only thirty-seven years old and, as one might expect from a man who had developed his own style of blade at such a young age, he was endowed with an extremely peculiar look. *The Secret Record of the Great Chancellor of Suruga*, which records the details of the duel, describes it as follows:

"His hair, black and long, was combed back and gathered into a ponytail that fell over his shoulders. His countenance was so pale that it seemed that he suffered from tuberculosis. His eyes were always half-closed and elongated, as if he were going to fall asleep. His nose was sharp and his cheeks sunken. In short, his face resembled that of a starving wolf."

In spite of being described without any kindness, if one makes the effort to adequately imagine that countenance, what appears is a face that is not at all unpleasant. Rather, it gives the impression that it possesses a kind of sinister beauty.

In fact, throughout his life he had been involved in conflicts around several women, and it cannot be denied that much of the responsibility for his death lay with his beautiful wife.

However, whichever way you look at it, it is difficult to make any positive judgment about his idiosyncrasies. According to a couple of things that are now in the public domain, one could guess how he managed to take his wife from his employer by means of a complex deception, or why he was not able in all his life to get some disciples who admired him with devotion.

In addition, he was extremely conceited and could not bear the slightest insult. Especially since he created his own school, any criticism inflicted on his technique received a fierce counterattack, which contributed to the fact that the rumors about his person were notably negative.

In fact, his participation in the duel with real swords that cost him his life was not at all necessary, and no one even forced him to do so. He simply took a few insignificant words as a challenge and insisted on dueling himself.

As a result of that fight he died, and at the same time his *Mirai-chishin* style received a blow from which it would be very difficult for him to recover. In a manner of speaking, the unfortunate fate of the *Mirai-chishin* style was to be born with Kuroe Gotaro Muneyuki and disappear with him.

II

In the spring of the second year of the Kan'ei era (1625), when he was still calling himself Akae Gozo, Kuroe Gotaro was hired to serve in the Kaga fief.

It is not known what kind of life he led until then. It was said that he had previously held an important position in a certain fiefdom in western Japan, until he screwed up over an affair with a woman, but in any case what seems certain is that he had led a life as a *ronin* for a long time and was a sly fox.

It was the captain of the fiefdom guard, Muraoka Hanzaemon, who arranged for him to be hired.

Upon learning that the stipend he would receive as a new hire would be only fifty *koku*, discontent ran through Gozo's mind, but he bowed his head casually, thanked and accepted.

—I have heard that you practice the *Chishin* style, but that is a technique I have never heard of before. What is it? — asked the martial arts instructor of the fief, Ishiguro Budayu, who was also present.

—It is a style initiated by master Yasumura Hanzuemon, practiced in the province of Inshu. The *Kage* style is taken as a starting point, but the master added all the virtues of the other schools that proliferated later until it was perfected.

—Ah, I see. It seems extremely interesting. But then it's supposed to include my *Tanseki* style sword technique as well, right? Ha ha ha! I wish I could see that, — said Ishiguro with a tone of mockery.

After hearing that comment, Gozo opened his eyes a little wider to the right side only and gave a piercing glance back to his interlocutor, but apart from that he gave no answer.

The answer was only given to himself:

"As you wish, I will show it to you without fail, one day."

Gozo was doing everything he could to control the eruption of his rage, for the chances of finding a new position in which to serve were extremely slim, and he was convinced that once he found one, he would be able to break through and move upward with his skill with the sword.

Muraoka Hanzaemon had never liked Ishiguro's arrogant attitude, so after that he felt a special predilection for Akae Gozo, and took every opportunity to talk to others about his skill in the martial arts.

Gozo himself often frequented the house at Muraoka. But his attitude was not especially one of praising others by lowering himself. What pleased Muraoka so much, even though he was sparing in words and could be

rude, was his calm composure, which was even unsettling because it did not agree with his age, and his unusually good instinct for perceiving his interlocutor's desires incisively and expressing them succinctly as if they coincided with his own intentions.

—He is a man of no affection and good understanding, — Hanzaemon used to say to his son Yasunosuke, who was also totally fascinated by the martial arts of Gozo.

In fact, such was the extent of Gozo's skill with the blade that even Yasunosuke, the most outstanding swordsman among the young men of the fief, was nowhere near his level. Furthermore, Gozo not only distinguished himself in his use of the blade, but also wielded the spear and even had a knowledge of *shuriken* from the Matsumura school.

Yasunosuke was convinced that he was not inferior to instructor Ishiguro Budayu, and on one occasion he expressed that to him.

—Not at all, why compare someone like me to Mr. Ishiguro... — Gozo replied with a laudatory tone, but it was obvious that he was proud inside. Gozo was astonished, for he knew the true ability of Budayu.

"Unfortunately, I am no match for him."

He was fully aware of that. He gritted his teeth and a pale, stinging light shone from the bottom of his pupils.

One day, by order of the feudal lord and advisor Maeda Toshitsune, test cuts were to be performed to check the quality of the new blades. Budayu wielded a blade of the master forger Echizen Yasutsugu, and demanded that the criminal on whom it was to be tested be allowed to wield a *katana* as well. The criminal in question was not a samurai, but a ruthless man named Izo with a history of murder behind him.

Budayu told the fearful commanding officer not to worry, and then turned to Izo:

—Don't hold yourself off from attacking me. If you could only cut me down, I would beg for your life to be spared, even if I had to give mine in return.

With no formal knowledge of martial arts, but used to seeing blood, Izo threw himself recklessly at Budayu's chest with the force of a demon and a fearsome murderous intent, risking his life with a daring offensive tactic. Budayu stood on guard, a cold smile on his face, his body tilted with his left shoulder forward and his blade down on his right. Just as it looked as if the blade Izo wielded was about to impact his left shoulder, a cry of attack erupted from Budayu's throat, divided into two voices:

—Eei! Too!

The spectators held their breath in amazement and could see before their eyes Izo's body cut in two, rolling on the ground, and his decapitated head, which had flown a couple of meters to the right dripping with blood.

With the first stroke of the sword he had split Izo's body in two with a diagonal cut upwards from his left side to his right shoulder, and with the next he had slit the torso which was already beginning to collapse and the head had flown away.

Akai Gozo felt his firmly clenched hands tremble slightly as he watched Budayu carefully, who smiled exultantly as he contemplated the bloody blade. Then Budayu wiped the blood from the *katana*, turned and nodded proudly in response to the praise of those present, until he saw Gozo and said:

—Ah! You had come too? Well? The upward diagonal-cutting technique of the *Tanseki* style you just saw will be included in that *Chishin* style of yours, won't it? Ha-ha-ha!

The scornful comment he made on the day hiring Gozo was decided to be ignored, because deep down Gozo was convinced of his abilities, "That one is not capable of defeating me".

This time, however, the mockery reached Gozo's soul and planted a resentment in it, for he was now aware that he was no match for his opponent. And this, in turn, shattered the hope that Gozo secretly harboured: his longing that one day he would defeat Budayu and take away his position as instructor.

It was from that moment on that an intense hatred for Budayu settled in the cold bowels of the inexpressive Gozo.

III

After some time passed, the rumor that Ishiguro Budayu wanted to take Tamae, the daughter of the magistrate of the department of the construction Sakura Jirota, as his wife began to circulate around the clan. Tamae was a very popular girl in the fief because of her beauty.

Although everyone in the fief recognized Budayu's unparalleled skill in the martial arts, considering that face of his that in honor of the truth was hard to say had anything beautiful, and his arrogant and sometimes even mean attitude, people commented with all cruelty:

—That man and Tamae?

When the rumor reached Gozo's ears, he squinted so much that his eyes were almost closed and he stared for a long time at a point in the air, until

he finally shook his head, as if he had reached some conclusion, and went to visit the Muraoka residence.

He greeted Hanzaemon and immediately headed for the separate pavilion, where Yasunosuke was staying. The latter was squatting in the corridor overlooking the garden, distracted and leaning against a pillar. At Gozo's call, he turned with a sudden, slightly confused smile, as if he had just woken from a dream.

—Yasunosuke, something is tormenting me deeply of late, — Gozo said quietly, as if restrained.

Yasunosuke looked up at his face for any response and opened his eyes a little wider. Gozo sat down next to him, let out a deep sigh, and added, — It's obvious...

—Huh?

—Poor Tamae.

The two of them stood silently gazing at the surface of the grass. Under the rays of the spring sun, in the midst of the greenery there were already some slight bumps coming to life. Something tender and warm squirmed into Yasunosuke's heart as if it were tensing, and a stifling restlessness invaded him. Gozo coldly calculated the boiling feelings in Yasunosuke's chest and waited for them to explode.

—Mr. Akae, I am having a very hard time, but I think I have no choice but to give up, — Yasunosuke finally acknowledged, his cheekbones seething, but Gozo interrupted him with a piercing voice:

—You don't have to give up. You should make Miss Tamae yours.

—But Budayu has already asked for her hand and says that because of his pride as a man he will get Miss Tamae.

—You have to... kill him.

—What?!

—You have to kill Budayu, — Gozo repeated.

—But as far as skill goes, we're not on the same level. There's no way I'm...

—On my own, no one would probably be a match for him. But if you and I join forces, we can surely kill him.

When feelings of love soar on the wings of youth, they easily fly over all logic.

As the delicate figure of Tamae came to mind as a reward for the obscene plan to defeat a more senior member of the same clan between two people, while swallowing saliva, Yasunosuke swallowed the idea as well.

Three nights after that, Ishiguro Budayu appeared alone in the grounds of the Kosaka shrine, well away from the castle.

He had received an anonymous letter of challenge.

His opponent clearly identified himself as "the person who loves Tamae". He also demanded that if he appreciated her honor, he should go to the meeting alone.

Budayu, who had tremendous confidence in his own abilities, tore up the letter of challenge and went to the right place without informing any of his disciples.

From the shadows of the trees a dark silhouette emerged, which immediately drew its sword and began to speak:

—Lord Ishiguro, do you renounce Tamae, or do we fight a duel to the death?

Budayu laughed loudly, but in his hand he already had his sword drawn.

—Ha, ha, ha. That voice is that of Muraoka's son, is it not? Don't waste your life over some nonsense. Go on, go home. I won't tell anyone about tonight.

Budayu persisted in his contemptuous attitude toward his opponent.

Suddenly his blade flashed vehemently in the darkness to repel two *shuriken* flying left and right, but just within those split-second intervals, Yasunosuke's blade had inflicted a lethal cut on his chest.

—Uh! You wretch...

Unexpectedly, from behind Budayu, who was reeling involuntarily, another sharp blade was thrust into his shoulder.

IV

Half a year passed without the murderer of Budayu being identified and Tamae finally became the wife of Muraoka Yasunosuke. A few days after the wedding night, an unexpected comment from Tamae surprised Yasunosuke.

—It must have been you who killed Ishiguro Budayu.

—What are you talking about... how could I... — Yasunosuke tried to make an excuse, but Tamae went on:

—Don't try to hide it. I don't think there's another person in the whole clan who could kill a man like Budayu.

These words gratifyingly boosted the self-esteem of Yasunosuke, who no longer showed any interest in denying it and simply smiled ambiguously.

—When the talk of lord Ishiguro began, — Tamae continued, — it was so unpleasant to me that I even felt chills. But when my father informed me that Budayu was an expert in martial tactics unparalleled in all of north-western Japan, I inevitably resigned myself to it. What a woman's heart

desires, above all, is someone strong. I was very happy to know that you was more stronger than Budayu.

Yasunosuke listened to these praises while hiding his feelings of guilt. The glossy face of Tamae, whose long black eyelashes faded in the light of the fire and whose eyes stared at it, seemed to Yasunosuke of unparalleled beauty and sensuality.

After Yasunosuke got married, Gozo continued to frequent the Muraoka residence as much as before... or rather, much more than before.

Obviously, his intention was to get his father Muraoka Hanzaemon to improve his social standing through Yasunosuke.

His ultimate goal was to get a recommendation for the position of martial arts instructor for the fief in place of Budayu. He had complete confidence in his abilities and believed that, after Budayu's death, there was no one in the entire clan who could surpass him in skill. Furthermore, he was convinced that Yasunosuke had an obligation to do everything in his power to help him.

At that time, however, he began to feel that the great weakness that had ruined his past was catching up with him again, stronger every day. That weakness was none other than his obsession with beautiful women.

Tamae's innocent, newlywed silhouette gradually awakened a strange attraction in him, and under his ice-cold skin began to burn a maddening passion.

Gozo hoped that he could rise in rank thanks to Yasunosuke, and at the same time he longed to hold his tender wife in his arms. These two incompatible desires were growing stronger by the day, and stronger in the consciousness of Gozo, who saw no contradiction between them.

At the same time, Yasunosuke's heart was also becoming embroiled in conflicting feelings: the conviction that he owed Gozo a favor, and at the same time the desire to remove from his sight the one man who had the ability to betray him and reveal his secret. It was not long before Yasunosuke's heart quickly turned to the second option.

—That Gozo casts every glance at Tamae... and she takes too much confidence in him, too, — such were the justifications Yasunosuke whispered to himself.

When Gozo realized that time was passing and that Yasunosuke not only did not help him to prosper in life, but also tended to show a cold attitude toward him to get him off his back, he quickly understood what was going on in his mind.

—Huh! The ungrateful one! Well, I am going to give up my fifty *koku* fraction of rice, and in return I will get his wife, — decided Gozo.

When it came to women, he was an expert, and Yasunosuke was no match for him. He soon realized that Tamae's love for Yasunosuke was based on her overestimation of his martial abilities.

Under the guise of innocent jokes, in Tamae's presence, he showed her how he can *shuriken* a little bird that had landed in a tree in the garden. Then he took the opportunity to remind her that *shuriken* had appeared next to Budayu's body. He pretended not to notice the shock on Tamae's face and made her see that it was not only Yasunosuke's strength that had killed Budayu.

—Don't talk nonsense! — Yasunosuke was indignant and blushed when Tamae questioned him about it, and assured him that he had killed Budayu on his own.

The next night, however, he invited Gozo in and rebuked him harshly for revealing the secret. But Gozo winked at him and smiled from ear to ear.

—Tch. Are you making fun of me?

Yasunosuke reached for the hilt of his *katana*. At the same time, Gozo recoiled suddenly, holding a long sword in his right hand and a short sword in his left.

After half an hour, Gozo appeared abruptly before Tamae and spoke to her in a commanding, urgent tone:

—Tamae, I have killed Yasunosuke. Just as I killed Budayu. You are mine now.

Gozo's horribly pale cheeks had been tinged slightly red by the glow of the blood of the victim he had just murdered, giving it a sinister beauty as he watched Tamae.

V

Gozo fled with Tamae and, guided by destiny, settled in Kofu. He changed his name to Kuroe Gotaro and opened a *dojo* in the city, on the facade of which he hung a huge sign that read: "*Mirai-chishin* style". It referred to the technique he had been secretly perfecting since he murdered Ishiguro Budayu, and whose first victim had been Yasunosuke.

After defeating the formidable enemy that was Budayu, through his own *shuriken* and Yasunosuke's sword, Gozo suddenly had an idea.

—If I could have carried out the attack made with Yasunosuke and myself, alone, I am sure I could have defeated Budayu without any help.

Obsessed by this new thought, he gave himself body and soul to developing the technique.

He held a long sword in his right hand and advanced by drawing a small circle with the short sword that he held high in his left hand, and then threw the short sword at the opponent's chest, lightning fast.

Obviously, if the short sword is thrust directly into the opponent's chest, the fight is over; but even if it is not, in order to repel or knock down the coming sword, the opponent should concentrate all his strength on that task at that moment. It is in those brief moments that one must throw oneself upon the opponent and slash him with the other sword.

He called this deadly blow as "the sword of the mysterious flying dragon".

Word soon spread throughout the city surrounding Kofu Castle about the *Mirai-chishin* style of Kuroe Gotaro, formerly known as Akae Gozo.

After a group of boastful samurai from the castle who had gone half-jokingly, thinking that the style was nothing more than a descendant of Musashi's *Enmei* style, were defeated almost without resistance, one after another the students joined the *dojo* where the strange style was practiced with two swords.

In the city of Kofu the *Mirai-chishin* style became so popular that no other style was accepted, and in a short time Kuroe's fame spread first through the whole province of Kai and then to the city of Sunpu.

As his reputation as an invincible swordsman grew, Gotaro came to understand the heart of Tamae with greater certainty. At first, Tamae had reluctantly let himself be drawn in by a mixture of shock and uneasiness in equal measure, but now he had begun to show admiration and affection for the husband who was a master of the blade beyond compare.

Having fully understood Tamae, it was now Gotaro's new ambition to be hired by the fief of Suruga as the official martial arts instructor.

The provinces of Kai, Suruga, and Totomi were the territories of the great advisor Tadanaga, and Kofu Castle was dependent upon Sunpu Castle.

Gotaro knew that one day and by some means he would have to leave for Sunpu, and secretly he was waiting for his chance.

With respect to the feudal lord, he had a particularly attentive interaction.

His way of proceeding was the usual one for him: although he showed himself to be somewhat abrupt, in reality he always guessed the feelings of his interlocutors and acted accordingly. In many cases he was successful, but there were also some perceptive people who abhorred him and commented on him:

—I don't know why, but I have a thing for that guy...

Obviously there were many who slandered him because they were envious of his sword technique. He proclaimed himself to be the supreme expert in all matters of swordplay, and he would answer any criticism of his *Mirai-chishin* style with a mocking laugh, and this made people dislike him more than they had to.

If he deliberately adopted this attitude, it was obviously not only to fulfill Tamae's masculine ideal, but also because he really had so much self-confidence and, above all, it can be assumed that he also aimed to attract the attention of Sunpu Castle by means of this overwhelming self-publicity.

It didn't take long for the repercussions to appear. Or rather, he took it upon himself to bring it about.

Gotaro went to the mansion of the Kofu castle magistrate, Hinata Hanbei Masayuki. In the midst of his conversation with several of the guests, a man named Doj Sanjuro, who was also present, remarked in passing:—Using two swords, if you think about it, seems more advantageous than using just one, but when it comes to a real expert, it seems that a single sword is much more preferable.

Gotaro could not pass up such a comment.

—And who is this genuine expert you speak of, if I may ask?

Sanjuro answered him in a dazed manner, and with a stern tone of voice that suggested he could not forgive such an irresponsible comment:

—I was not referring to anyone in particular, it's just that the other day this debate came up in a conversation about how Musashi, of the *Enmei* style, fled in fear from a duel with Murakami Kichinojo, of the *Nikaido* style.

—Musashi's two-sword style is not the real thing.

After this unpleasant statement from Gotaro, another man named Takio Jujiro immediately entered the conversation:

—How interesting! Although right now he is on duty at Sunpu castle, Kataoka Kyonosuke, a member of the guard who is said to be a master of the secrets of the *Nikaido* style that Doi mentioned. What would happen if Kuroe, who describes himself as superior to Musashi, and Kataoka Kyonosuke, who has mastered the *Nikaido* style feared by Musashi, were to confront each other?

—I would, — roared an enraged Gotaro, his voice more aggressive than usual.

To keep the matter from escalating, they immediately calmed Gotaro down and took him away, but the next day he asked through an official document to duel Kataoka Kyonosuke. Given the situation, in order to preserve the honor of the fief, they had no choice but to accept his request.

And these were the circumstances that led Kataoka Kyonosuke of the Nikaido school, who had nothing either for or against Kuroe Gotharo of the *Mirai-chishin* style since he knew nothing about it, to stake his life on a duel against him using real swords.

VI

Within the *Nikaido* style there were two factions. The first Nikaido faction was the one founded by Matsuyama Mondo, who lived in Kamakura during the Eiroku period (1558-1570), commonly known as "Heiho" (the *hei* method). The reason for this name is that the movements of this technique described the shapes of the characters "one" (一), "eight" (八) and "ten" (十), and if these ideograms were joined together, the character "hei" (平) was obtained. Mondo's grandson, Daikichi, made a name for himself serving Motogawa Sansai but was stabbed while taking a nap and because of that this style disappeared.

The other faction broke away from the *Gen* style originated by Kiso Shokuro of the Satomi clan, was founded by Hirai Shinpee and later implemented by Murakami Kichinojo, who scared Musashi away with it. Because both schools coincided in using the same name (Nikaido), the exploits of the aforementioned Matsuyama Mondo and Murakami Kichinojo were often confused, but the two factions were totally different. In order to distinguish the latter from the former, it was also called the *Nikaido-Gen* style.

Hirai Shinpee's *Nikaido* style was extremely peculiar. By nature, he was a weak and feeble man. In fact, as a young man, he was mocked by his teacher:

—With your strength you won't be able to cut even a spider's thread.

However, the example he had used to insult him served Shinpee well in developing a wonderful sword technique.

Desperate for his meager skills, Shinpee was wandering the countryside when he suddenly saw a spider's thread hanging from a tree branch before his eyes.

He remembered the mocking laughter of his master, which had hurt him so much, and in a rush he drew his *katana* and tried to cut the thread, but it would not cut.

The fine thread, perhaps shaken slightly by the air that shook the movement of the sword like a master of transformation, gently and

indifferently ignored the dozen cuts that Shinpee intended to inflict with his blade and still hung on the tree.

—That's it!

An idea flashed through his brain and opened his eyes like a plate.

And so it was that, after giving himself body and soul to intense training, he finally developed his *tareito* ("Hanging Thread") stance with which he was able to silently dodge any kind of attack.

The theory to avoid an attack is quite simple. No matter how much you spin it, all you have to do is move left or right at a distance equivalent to half the width of the front of your own body. Even in the case of a horizontal cut, it is enough to move the body back so that it is separated from the tip of the sword by a few millimetres.

As soon as the enemy's sword moves, you must find the place where the tip of the sword is directed, and then move the body as little as possible. That was the dizzying technique that Shinpee had managed to master, and which allowed him to perform such a subtle and fulminating maneuver in the blink of an eye.

As his opponent lunged and attacked with all his might, Shinpee held himself up like a hanging thread on a spider in a flexible position and dodged his opponent's blade, waiting for the opponent to run out of strength due to fatigue and impatience, then hurling himself at him like a whirlwind and knocking him down with a single sword strike.

Murakami Kichinojo was the first man to whom Hirai Shinpee passed on the secrets of that technique. He had originally trained in the *Okuyama* style, but he faced Hirai and saw that there was no way to beat him. When he was already dizzy, Hirai gave him a blow, Murakami bowed his head and became his disciple. It is said that he used to practice hanging a silk thread on a door lintel.

Starting with Murakami, many of those who learned this style resembled Hirai Shinpee: small, delicate-looking men with quiet personalities. It was probably because such people were comfortable with a sword technique of this style.

But, deep down, these people were not necessarily frail-tempered or constantly passive. It is clear that within the flexibility they displayed there was also a strong and tenacious fighting spirit. The story of Murakami Kichinojo and Miyamoto Musashi is a good example.

At first, Musashi was willing to duel Murakami and, perhaps with the intention of making a show of force, day after day he would move into a pine forest near Murakami's residence and be seen exercising with his blade. The scene has been described to us as follows:

"Splendidly dressed in a sophisticated summer kimono with his family's emblem stamped on it with gold leaf, he would show up night after night to practice his sword strokes. He was such a skillful man that from his ferocious attacks left and right, it seemed as if the big-nosed *tengu* demon had come down from Mount Atago."

When on one occasion those sword strikes lasted for more than four hours, a certain person went to inform Murakami Kichinojo, full of admiration, but Kichinojo smiled and told him:

—He has a lot of stamina! But what would he do if his opponent was able to hold out for six hours?

When this reached Musashi's ears, he was stunned, for he felt that he could not go that far, and in the evening he left secretly for another province.

It is not known from whom the guard of the Suruga fiefdom, Kataoka Kyonosuke, learned the *Nikaido-Gen* style, but he was among the few who had mastered the surprisingly flexible and persevering "hanging thread" stance, so he had a lot of prestige.

When it was announced that Kataoka was to face Kuroe Gotaro, who had achieved such dazzling fame with his *Mirai-chishin*, there was unusual interest among the people of the fief, but the pre-duel predictions, as explained earlier, were almost ninety percent in favor of Kuroe.

This was because, while many people had witnessed Gotaro's *Hiryuken* ("The Flying Dragon Sword") and that grand and splendid stance with the two swords had stolen the hearts of those who witnessed it, Kyonosuke's technique had been seen by only a few people, and even conceptually it gave an impression of fragility.

VII

A few days before the duel, Gotaro went into the city of Sunpu Castle, accompanied by some of his disciples, and never tired of openly proclaiming his sure victory in combat. Although he had come to terms with the fact that it would not be easy for him to defeat the "Hanging Thread" stance he had heard about, he was above all blindly confident in his two-sword stance and his "Flying Dragon Sword".

Instead, all Kataoka Kyonosuke commented on with an extremely humble attitude was:

—Kuroe is a renowned expert. The only thing I can do is defend myself against his "flying dragon sword" with all my might.

No one realized, however, that Kyonosuke, after a long deliberation, had made the drastic decision to give up the *Nikaido-Gen* style technique in order to achieve victory.

Kyonosuke had realized that if Gotaro destroys his *Nikaido-Gen* style technique, then he would be able to defeat him. At the same time, he became convinced that he had to beat him, and that the only way to defeat a tough opponent that you seem to have everything to lose against is to get into the fight at the risk of your life.

When he appeared on the purified white sand on the day of the duel, Kuroe Gotaro's face was even paler than usual due to the tension of the moment. His tall, emaciated figure, as people always whispered, was overflowing with the ferocity of a weathered wolf, but in the piercing pupils of his half-closed eyes there was a clear glimpse of an inner strength that was haughty and convinced of his victory.

If he won the tournament he would become the best in the provinces of Kai, Suruga, and Totomi, and then perhaps he would be granted the position of clan instructor that he so longed for. And in turn Tamae would have more respect for him and look at him enraptured with her large, sensuous eyes filled with admiration again under the pallor of her shaved eyebrows.

With the glittering path to glory opening up before her eyes, Gotaro was overcome by a strong fighting spirit that made his entire body tremble with excitement.

Already in front of Kataoka Kyonosuke, Gotaro held high in his right hand a long sword forged by Sukesada of Bizen Province, and in his left hand he held a short sword. His silhouette on guard gently raising both swords projected vividly before the eyes of the spectators as if they were witnessing a splendid dance in a *kabuki* play.

If that short sword, which he threw as if it were a *shuriken*, flew at the usual speed, surely Kyonosuke's "Hanging Thread" stance could easily dodge it. Now, if when the short sword flew out of Gotaro's hand even faster than an arrow of light, and clearly intended to injure Kyonosuke, even if he missed his target by a few inches, the "long sword of the flying dragon" would strike Kyonosuke just at the fleeting moment he moved his body, like lightning striking the ground.

Kyonosuke adopted the pose of the *Gen* style with the sword at a medium height and the body facing obliquely to the left, reducing the portion of the front of the body that was directed towards the opponent as much as

possible. His left shoulder, which projected forward, pointed at the base of his opponent's neck, waiting for the moment to attack the short sword that Gotaro wielded in his left hand and with which he now drew soft circles. If Gotaro advanced an inch or two, Kyonosuke retreated the same distance. If Kyonosuke moved a few inches to the left, Gotaro did the same but to the right.

These were stifling minutes in which, instead of swords, it was looks and minds at odds with one another that made the sparks fly.

Although Kyonosuke's strong point should be to wait for the opponent's exhaustion after repeated attacks and strikes, it was clear that he was running out of both physical strength and willpower.

Just as he noticed bubbling pearls of sweat beginning to form on Kyonosuke's pale forehead, Gotaro caused the short sword he held in his left hand to draw a white light in the sky, and the long sword he wielded in his right hand to hurl itself and his entire body toward the opponent. Both his sword and body collided head-on with Kyonosuke's sword and body, and a scream could be heard, but none of the attendants knew who had uttered it. The onlookers began to stand and peek out to find out, and they could see that the one lying on his back on the ground, as if he had been repelled, was Gotaro.

Kyonosuke staggered violently, with the short blade of Gotaro buried in his left shoulder, but as he plunged his sword into the ground to support himself and stand, he smiled.

He had done nothing to dodge the short blade of Gotaro that was flying toward him. Thus the main technique of the Nikaido-Gen school had been defeated — or rather, he had *allowed* it to be defeated. But it was precisely that which made it possible for his sword to go into the body of his adversary and cut him one thousandth of a second before Gotaro's did, thus completely defeating the invincible "Flying Dragon Sword".

HAYATE JONMAKUDZUKI

(«The hurricane that breaks through the barricades of the military camp»)

I

—Please give me your night guard post tonight, — Shujiro asked with a tone of voice that was slightly out of character.

When Gennosuke looked up to look back at him, his companion suddenly looked away.

—Saeki, did something happen?

—Yes. We will talk about it later, but tonight please replace me at my post as warehouse watchman and give me yours as a guard.

Gennosuke went to see his superior, told him that he had a toothache so, in order not to commit any carelessness, he asked him to replace him at his guard post with Saeki Shujiro, and he immediately got permission.

At the hour of the boar — ten o'clock at night — Shujiro entered the guard room. His companion was Shindo Buzaemon.

Since he used a spear from the Shinto school, he had been given special permission and had a short spear at his side.

In terms of age, Shindo would have been about ten years older than Shujiro, but in terms of his service in the castle he was relatively new, so it seems he did not have much contact with anyone. The adjoining room of ten tatami on the other side of the sliding door faced the bedroom of the feudal lord Tadanaga.

After half an hour Tadanaga retired to his room. His usual angry and piercing monosyllable cries were heard throughout the room. After a while, from the faintest hint of arrival, it could be deduced that the sliding door in the south corridor was quietly opened and three women entered the room, two of whom came out again shortly afterwards. Needless to say, the one who stayed in the room would be the woman who was sleeping with Tadanaga that night.

What the guards did then was to turn their heads away from Tadanaga's bedroom and sit upright on the floor with their chests out, their minds blank. Often the night passed quietly, without a sound coming from the bedroom, until finally the woman withdrew and Tadanaga rose to go to the washroom.

Sometimes, however, Tadanaga's sharp, low, relentless voice would leak

out. No doubt this happened when the woman did something that did not satisfy the feudal lord, and then the woman's slight voice was heard, with a tone that mixed fear and embarrassment.

The guards exchanged quick glances, sometimes accompanied by slight ironic smiles, and sometimes by lewd smiles from ear to ear. But even on nights when nothing was happening, they still were young people. No wonder from the moment the woman entered the bedroom, thoughts were clouded and sensual visions arose in their minds. If one were to look closely at those faces, one could glimpse the excitement in their hearts. That night, however, there was something out of the ordinary in the way that Shujiro's features were altered. From the moment he perceived that the woman had been left alone on Tadanaga's bed, his clenched fists to his knees, writhing and shaking, his teeth were grinding behind his tightly closed lips, his eyes were injected with blood, and his forehead began to soak with sweat.

Although it seemed impossible that his companion Shindo was not aware of his strange state, inexplicably, Shindo himself was so extremely impatient and agitated that he could not even pay attention to Shujiro. It seemed that all his attention was concentrated on his master's bedroom. Suddenly the two of them turned impetuously towards the sliding door leading to the bedroom, simultaneously raising one knee and standing on guard.

—You idiot! — there was an angry cry from Tadanaga, and then the sliding door which separated the bedroom from the adjoining antechamber had been thrown open. This was what made them react in such a manner. It was at this point that both Shindo and Shujiro first became aware of the dreadful countenance of each other. They both attributed it, however, to the tension of a guarded samurai when they noticed that some anomaly had occurred in their lord's bedroom.

Shindo placed his short spear on his raised left knee and Shujiro, for his part, grabbed the muzzle of his short sword sheath in his left hand and placed his right hand on the hilt.

Both sensed that the man was brimming with a fearsome thirst for blood, and were already preparing words with which to try and quell it, but all the two could do was move their lips slightly.

In the next room there was a clatter of footsteps as if they were playing cat and mouse. It was not a normal situation, but until the man called them, they were not allowed to open the sliding door to the bedroom on their own. With eyes fixed on the sliding door and trembling hands wielding

spear and *katana* respectively, the two men slowly approached, stealthily, the door. Then there were shouts...

—An intruder!

—Get him!

Surprisingly, though, those cries were not from the adjoining room, enveloped in a strange eruption of footsteps, but from the area where the library was situated, much to the north of the bedroom. Then there were angry cries and booing from four or five different places, which shattered the serenity of the night, and then there were signs of people running around.

"What was that", both Shindo and Shujiro wondered when, after looking at one another, a rumble was heard as if someone had hit the sliding door before their eyes and shook it.

The bloody slide was still shaking as Shindo's short spear glinted and went right through the middle. A shriek was heard above the noise of the door breaking loose and the body of a woman, her snowy underwear dyed crimson even more intensely than the camellias, collapsed before them. Shindo hurriedly stepped back and muttered to himself, "Damn it!".

Yet he withdrew suddenly to a corner of the room, as quiet as a water bug, and put himself on guard with his spear, for he had sensed that, if he had remained motionless, Shujiro's sword would have descended upon his shoulder.

Five or six vassals rushed in.

—Chika! — Shujiro shouted as he tried to lift the woman's body.

Tadanaga watched him intently as his veins became more pronounced on his pale forehead.

II

The incident was due to a logical sequence of events. Chika was serving Tadanaga in her bedroom, but she refused to untie her *obi*, so to avoid violence from Tadanaga, she fled to the anteroom. Coincidentally, at the same time Komura Gennosuke discovered someone suspicious near the library, confronted him and, along with his companions, managed to corner him and kill him with a sword blow. This commotion reached the ears of Shindo Buzaemon, who interpreted it as some danger stalking his lord, speared through the sliding door and stuck it into Chika.

—See, I thought that the intruder who had hidden in the library and the lady who was serving in the bedroom might be in cahoots to try to inflict some harm on my lord? — Shindo openly justified himself to Inspector Watanabe Kenmotsu's investigation.

—And what would have happened if by chance, by attacking through the sliding door, you had accidentally injured our lord? — Watanabe interrogated him.

—With all due respect, let me tell you that I am an expert in the art of the *Shinto* style spear, one of whose secret techniques is to pierce the curtains around military camps. I never make a single mistake, — Shindo boasted.

—Well, I have heard of that technique, — Watanabe nodded admiringly.

For his part, Saeki Shujiro kept muttering incoherently, as if his head were elsewhere. His superiors ridiculed him amidst the whispering. Despite being an expert in the drawing technique of the Tamiya school, did he cower at the sight of what was happening? After all, compared to Shindo, he's so young...

—Maybe Saeki has something to do with what happened last night... Gennosuke could not bear such insinuations any longer and went to reproach Shujiro that very night.

—I am going to kill Shindo, — declared Shujiro.

He also made an unexpected confession: he had been having a deep relationship with Chika for a long time.

When he heard that Tadanaga had claimed his services, Chika went to Shujiro and assured him emphatically:

—There's no way I'm going to fulfill the lord's wishes.

—But what will you do if he forces you to do so?

—In the worst case, I would bite my tongue and die.

—Chika, I'm very grateful to you. If you are so determined, I won't let you die unnecessarily by yourself. I'll die with you too.

—What?

—The day you have to spend the night with the lord, I'll take over the guard post. If the lord persists forcing you, flee to the guard room. I'll stab you before the lord's eyes, and then I'll kill myself too.

Chika entered Tadanaga's bedroom determined to die. But in the corridor, before she entered, she suddenly felt uneasy and, to make sure, asked the older woman who accompanied her:

—Who are the people in charge of the guard tonight?

Hearing that the guards would be Shindo Buzaemon and Komura Gennosuke, Chika felt a twinge in her chest. She deduced that something would have happened to Shujiro and he have failed in his attempt to swap places with the night guard. Fleeing from the clutches of Tadanaga, she ran to the antechamber, but she did not open the sliding door to the guards' quarters because she feared that if she entered there in her disheveled night clothes, with Shujiro not present, she would end up being captured by Shindo and Komura.

She escaped as far as she could and resigned herself to biting out her tongue ...but just then something stuck in her and pierced her from the other side of the door.

—Why didn't you kill Shindo at that moment to avenge Chika's death? — Gennosuke asked.

—When he killed her, he quickly retreated a few feet and stood on guard. Then I saw that Chika was looking at me as she took her last breath, so I went to embrace her. But I cannot forgive that damned Shindo. I will kill him.

III

There was reason for Inspector Watanabe to have his eyes opened like a dish when Shindo mentioned to him in his reply the secret technique of the *Shinto* style for piercing the curtains surrounding the military camps. Obviously, this technique had its origin in the tactics used in battle when a warrior either infiltrated the enemy's camp under cover of darkness at night, or taking advantage of the confusion of the contest, assaulted the enemy's headquarters and, from outside the surrounding curtain wall, pierced the enemy general with a spear. It was one of the main techniques of the *Shinto* style.

The founder of the art of spear handling in the Shinto school was Iizasa Wakasanokami Morichika, following the tradition of Iizasa Choisai, and together with his son Morinobu and grandson Moritsuna were known as unrivalled experts. The technique of breaking through the encirclement of the camps was acquired by both father and son (Morinobu and Moritsuna) in the midst of the frequent tumult of war.

If it was already difficult just to get someone across a curtain, the height of difficulty was to identify the general among all the other people who could be found on the other side of the fence and to spear him without missing a beat.

It is said that at the Battle of Okehazama (1560), General Hattori

Kazutada, under Oda Nobunaga, gave the first spear cut to enemy general Imagawa Yoshimoto using this technique of piercing the curtains. And it was also through this secret technique that Yasuda Sakubei managed to drive his spear into Oda Nobunaga through the paper sliding door, when Nobunaga was in the Buddhist temple in Honno (Kyoto, 1582), glued to the door and about to throw himself into the flames that swept through the temple.

After this, the person best known for his skill with this technique is Anazawa Unsai, a disciple of Moritsuna. According to the story, Unsai was at a banquet to contemplate the chrysanthemums when he stood up and turned in his direction, which were on the other side of the curtains, with the spear in his hand.

—This chrysanthemum is white, the next one is yellow, and this one is red, — he shouted as he went through the heart of the chrysanthemums one by one in the colours he was naming.

Perhaps he also had some knowledge of the technique of seeing through things.

—If I concentrate with my mind's eye, the curtain, the sliding door, and even the walls disappear instantly, — Unsai used to boast.

Later, Anazawa Unsai passed on the *Shinto* style to Kashiwara Gorozaemon Toshishige and it became very popular, especially in Awa Province, but as the wars subsided, the secret technique of walking through the curtains of the camps gradually fell into oblivion and it was believed that there was virtually no one left to master it.

Watanabe, a regular practitioner of the Honma school spear art, was shocked to learn that Shindo Buzaemon had mastered the technique. He was delighted to have made an unexpected discovery.

And it was this Shindo whom Shujiro said he wanted to kill. Shujiro was extremely agitated, so Gennosuke, who was only a little older than him, tried to calm him down:

—Wait, Saeki. Even if he pays attention to what you tell him, he has considerable strength. Do not be hasty.

—Whatever strength he has, as Chika's killer, he is my enemy.

—Well, if Shindo speared Chika it was because he felt the lord was in danger and attacked impulsively. Calling him "the enemy" is a bit of an exaggeration...

—And can you tell what danger the lord was in? It is clear that the woman who is going to spend the night with him won't carry even a small knife.

—Didn't he already explain that when I shouted that there was an intruder in the library, he thought that the intruder and Chika were in cahoots? He didn't know Chika, so although he made a mistake, it was partly inevitable.

—In that case, how come he didn't run down the corridor to the north in search of the intruder? Even if he thought Chika was the intruder's ally, she was no more than an unarmed woman, whom he could have killed even if he had waited for the master's order.

—Mmm, — Gennosuke replied, but instantly he opened his eyes wide, — Saeki, perhaps this is all a bold ploy of that Shindo.

—What?

—Could he not have killed Chika by accident when his intention was actually to kill the lord?

—Huh?

—Perhaps he prepared everything beforehand with the intruder I killed in the library: the intruder would enter through the outer corridor of the northern zone, and when the lord fled to the antechamber, Shindo would spear him with his technique to get through the wall. But the incident with Chika spoiled his plan. If that is the case, I must kill the man myself, for the safety of our lord.

—I don't know if that guy planned murder of our lord or not. But in any case, I am going to kill him to avenge Chika's death.

Shujiro never directed his resentment towards his lord Tadanaga, who was the one who caused — even if by accident — the death of his beloved as a result of trying to dishonor her, but instead guided it exclusively towards the perpetrator, Shindo Buzaemon.

It seems that he was able to completely suppress the urge to bear a grudge and consider his lord an enemy, due in large part to the sense of submission that was so deeply rooted in him. If nothing else, the anger he felt toward Shindo grew even more intense. Gennosuke was attempting to restrain an enraged Shujiro by advising him to wait for the right moment so as not to make any mistakes, and assuring him that he would lend a hand. The opportunity to confront Shindo came unexpectedly soon, however.

—I would like to show my lord again the secret technique, rare these days, of spearing through the camp enclosure, — Shindo had been summoned at Watanabe's suggestion.

On one side of the curtain which had been spread out in the garden a person would stand holding a red ball in one hand and a white ball in the other, and on the other side of the curtain Shindo would stand on his guard

with his spear and would have to run through the red ball or the white ball with it, as he was ordered.

—The person holding the balls will be Saeki Shujiro, — Watanabe said. On Tadanaga's face, who stood in the corridor overlooking the garden, there was something of a mocking smile, for that nomination had been his idea.

Shujiro accepted the order by bowing his head. Gennosuke, who was standing next to him, whispered to him:

—If he makes a mistake in choosing the ball, consider him the lord's murderer, draw and kill him immediately without warning.

Shujiro stood up without replying. He had already decided that the moment Shindo got through the ball, whether he got the color right or missed and got through the other one, he would kill him with an *iai*.

They stood facing each other, separated by the curtain. Shujiro drew the short blade he carried along with the long one on the left side and switched it to the right side. He then turned to Watanabe, who raised his eyebrows in disbelief, and explained to him casually:

—If I carry both swords on the same side, my left shoulder will fall more. In fact, his intention was different: if Shindo pierced the ball he was holding in his left hand, he would draw the long sword in his right hand, and if he plunged his spear into the ball he was holding in his right hand, he would take the short sword in his right hand and kill him.

All present considered that, knowing Shujiro's height in advance and the skill that Shindo had, it would not be too difficult for him to deduce the position of the balls. The problem was distinguishing between the red and white ones with a curtain in between.

Shujiro waited, holding the red ball in his hand right and the white one on the left.

IV

—First he runs through the white ball, then the red one, — commanded Watanabe.

—I will carry it out according to the rules of the battlefield, — explained Shindo, and took the stance with his spear.

—Of course, — nodded Watanabe.

Shindo placed the spear halfway up and looked at the curtain with such a penetrating gaze that it seemed capable of piercing it.

Everyone present was expectant, and assumed that he was concentrating his mental vision on whether the red ball was on the left or on the right.

However, what the man with the bold and defiant expression ended up doing was a totally unexpected act. Without even taking aim, and with a seemingly careless step, he quickly approached the curtain, stretched the long spear about ten feet from the tip, and crossed the curtain right in the middle.

All present shouted in unison, after which there was a strange groan, and then Shujiro collapsed forward. With his right hand he had begun to pull out the handle of his long sword, but the tip of the spear had pierced it from the center of his chest to his back and he already had his last breath. —What was that for?

—Shindo, that was unacceptable! — exclaimed Watanabe, who had come to after the initial surprise, and Komura, too.

After removing the spear, Shindo wiped the blood from him silently, then went to Tadanaga and bowed to him.

—Earlier I said that I would perform it according to the rules of the battlefield, and I obtained your permission. If I had been ordered to pass through only one ball, either the red or the white one, I would have done so, but if I am ordered to pass through both, first the white one and then the red one, to knock down both in one blow represents the path to victory on the battlefield.

Watanabe was about to reply, but Tadanaga interrupted him:

—Well done, that was splendid.

Just as when Chika was speared, Tadanaga's veins were prominently marked on his forehead.

In both cases, it was a sign of his hatred for the young Shujiro who had embraced Chika and sobbed for her, the woman who had rejected him. Neither Tadanaga nor Watanabe realized that the people around him were holding back Komura Gennosuke with all their might so that he wouldn't jump on Shindo.

That same night, Gennosuke visited Watanabe at his mansion and confessed all his suspicions to him.

—Shindo plunged the spear into Saeki's chest because he cannot tell the difference between red and white with a curtain. I have no doubt that he also speared Chika by mistake, when he intended to spear our lord.

On that occasion, Watanabe himself had immediately thought, "What if he had wounded my lord Tadanaga by driving the spear through the sliding door?". That concern was supposed to have disappeared when Shindo replied that he had mastered the technique of breaking through the camp

enclosure but, as Gennosuke argued, if despite the fact that Shindo was skilled enough to spear someone behind a curtain, but was unable to distinguish which person he was spearing, then his behavior was quite problematic.

—All that talk about the rules of the battlefield was nothing more than a deception. Killing a completely innocent fellow man like that, playing a temporary role, seems to me to be totally brutal and heartless, and not at all like an ordinary samurai.

Watanabe was puzzled. Gennosuke continued:

—He deduced the hatred the lord had for Saeki and so dared to commit the atrocity, to cover up his own lack of skill while gaining the lord's trust. But if he managed to get even closer to the lord, this could lead to a very serious incident.

Watanabe's dismay was growing with all that Gennosuke was telling him. Finally, Gennosuke proposed a plan to remedy the situation:

—At the next dueling tournament on September 24th, allow me to face Shindo. I assure you that you will be able to watch me finish him off in a spectacular way.

V

The author has already made it clear on several occasions that the popular version of the Kan'ei era tournament was based on the extremely violent dueling tournament with real swords that took place on September 24th of the sixth year of the Kan'ei era, in the presence of the great advisor and lord of Suruga Castle, Tokugawa Tadanaga.

On that occasion, the third duel in the afternoon was between Komura Gennosuke and Shindo Buzaemon.

It had been announced beforehand that, by special order of Tadanaga, the duel between these two participants would take the form of an exhibition of Shindo's technique of walking through the curtains of a camp, and so it had aroused great interest not only among the warrior vassals but also among the general public.

In the second duel of the afternoon, Kataoka Kyonosuke of the *Nikaido-Gen* style, even with a sword deeply embedded in his left shoulder, had managed to defeat "The Flying Dragon Sword", Kuroe Gotaro's technique of the *Mirai-chishin* style. Immediately after the latter was defeated, a curtain, like those used to fence off military camps, stretched from east to west on the battlefield.

On the southern side of the curtain stood Shindo Buzaemon wielding his

long spear, and on the northern side stood Komura Gennosuke with his favorite blade drawn.

Shindo was granted the privilege of being the first to attack through the curtain. If he could bring Gennosuke down with that first blow, the fight would be over. If, however, Shindo missed the blow or was stopped by Gennosuke, then he could cut the curtain and head towards Shindo to attack him freely.

Clearly, off the battlefield, Shindo's technique was at a disadvantage. To begin with, the opponent was fully aware that he was going to be attacked and was in guard, so a surprise attack was impossible. Also, since the opponent was not wearing armor loaded with metal parts, if he moved carefully enough he would not be able to pick up even the slightest sound. On the other hand, however, he had an advantage that he did not have in the middle of a battle: there was no danger that an enemy soldier could discover you from behind or from the sides. It was enough to concentrate only on the adversary beyond the curtain.

In the face of this, Gennosuke began with the disadvantage of not being able to make any movement while waiting for the enemy to attack. Also, with the obstacle of the curtain in the way, as an expert in the *Hangan* style, he had no way to use his strength — the "hurricane" sword.

The main characteristic of the *Hangan* style was the agile and fast handling of the long sword. It was especially popular in the area around Kyoto, so there were quite a few people in the eastern provinces who practiced it. The hurricane sword was one of the ten secret techniques that *Hangan* style masters passed on to a single excellent disciple.

Until that time, Gennosuke had only shown his secret hurricane sword technique to clan members on one occasion. It was several years ago, when one Kamiya Umanajo, an expert in the martial art of the staff who identified himself as a follower of the *Ookami* style, appeared in the castle town of Suruga and was defeating all the *dojos* in the town one after another.

On hearing the rumors, Tadanaga was shocked and summoned him to the castle, where he made him face the vassal warriors he deemed appropriate, but not a single one of them even managed to touch Kamiya's body with their wooden swords.

As soon as his ten-foot staff began to dance through the air and display up to ten different techniques (*oshizume*: pushing and cornering; *midaredome*: stopping the chaos; *ushirozue*: behind the staff; *taisha*: the waiting wheel; *kengome*: going into space; *kikkake*: incomplete cut; *shinshin*: royal advance; *raiuchi*: thunder strike; *haraidome*: stopping a cross cut;

yokogiridome: stopping a horizontal cut), it seemed that the opponent, like water falling from the top of a waterfall or a wheel rolling down a slope, could do nothing but take those strikes and retreat step by step while wiping away the sweat.

And then Gennosuke appeared. Carelessly wielding a ninety-centimeter wooden sword, he suddenly ran in circles around Kamiya Umanojo like a hurricane.

As soon as Kamiya turned to his right he had Gennosuke on his back, and as soon as he turned around Gennosuke returned to the original position. Attacked by the hurricane blade that Gennosuke was drawing as it rotated at spectacular speed around his body, even Kamiya herself began to feel dizzy and when he unconsciously began to stagger, sweating profusely, Gennosuke struck him a severe blow to the shoulder.

—I am sorry... I give up, — Kamiya said, one knee to the ground.

If they faced each other under normal conditions, as much as Shindo Buzaemon was an expert in the handling of the *Shinto* style spear, there was no way he could stand up to Gennosuke's swift hurricane blade. However, having extended that curtain by order of Tadanaga ahead of Gennosuke, it was impossible for him to perform those dizzying rotations. Having been prevented from using his best technique and forced to give up all initiative to his opponent, the crowd began to fear Gennosuke's chances of victory, as most felt sympathy for the nice young man.

But now the two had begun the struggle that would decide between life and death, separated by a curtain. From the seats where Tadanaga sat, one could see what was happening on either side of the curtain, but obviously the two combatants could not see the silhouette of their opponent.

Gennosuke stood on guard with his long sword drawn and in a low position. As soon as the signal was given to begin the duel, however, from the middle of his side of the curtain he turned east and began to run as if he was slipping.

As if he was running through the clouds, there was neither the sound of his footsteps nor the slightest rustle of his clothing.

For his part, Shindo stood motionless in the center of his side of the curtain, focusing his eyes and ears. He placed his long spear horizontally, with the tip pointing slightly upward. He squinted so hard that it seemed as if he had his eyes half closed, but just when it seemed that he was going to close them completely, he suddenly opened them like plates. In this

manner he, too, turned to the east and, as if carried away by a misty wave, glided along at a brisk pace without making any noise or creaking.

Shindo stopped suddenly and stared at the point he was aiming at with his spear. Beginning with Tadanaga, all onlookers who could see both sides of the curtain held their breath. The tip of the spear pointed directly at Gennosuke's chest on the other side of the curtain.

With the spectators already convinced that Gennosuke was going to be pierced by that spear, the tip of the spear moved flashing like lightning. As soon as the tip tore through the curtain, Gennosuke's body leapt. Then with his right hand he lifted the glowing blade vertically and cut the cord that tied the curtain to the pole, causing it to collapse. Gennosuke grabbed one end of the curtain tightly and ran towards Shindo's back.

Shindo tried in vain to deliver a killing blow and had to remove the tip of the spear in a hurry, but then he saw the curtain come down on him from the right side and go around his back.

Shindo ran to keep it from wrapping him up, but Gennosuke's swift gallop was a step ahead. Gennosuke circled the pole on the west side as he continued to grab the end of the cloth and wrapped the curtain around Shindo's body completely.

Gennosuke continued to circle like a hurricane and, before people could even suspect what was happening, he left Shindo coiled between several layers of the curtain.

Aware that the spear was no longer of any use to him, Shindo quickly drew the short blade and tore the curtain that curled around his body vertically as if he was a diabolical being. As soon as he barely escaped the curtain, however, Gennosuke was on his guard and delivered a lethal blow to the back of his head.

—Do you feel Saeki's revenge now? — Gennosuke uttered the words, as if to plunge them into Shindo's ear one by one, as he groaned on the ground. He then moved forward, bowed and calmly began to wipe the blood from the blade with one end of the curtain.

MIKAWARI SHIAI

(«Duel of substitutes»)

I

The fourth match in the afternoon at the tournament with real swords in the presence of the feudal lord that took place in Suruga Castle on September 24th of the sixth year of the Kan'ei era, even among the eleven fights to the death that were held that day, had several aspects that made it especially unique.

First, as indicated in the *Secret Record of the Great Chancellor of Suruga*, it was Shibayama Hanbee Takahisa and Kurita Hikotaro Yoshiyuki who took part in this duel, but in reality others came to the duel posing as them. Secondly, in this duel the opponents fought as in a real battle: equipped with armor and helmet, and attacking each other on the back of a horse. In the popular legend of the dueling tournament of the Kan'ei era, based on this tournament before the feudal lord of Suruga, Okubo Hikozaemon and Kagatsume Kai also fought protected by helmet and armor, which is certainly an adaptation of this combat.

Thirdly, this duel ended, of course, in the presence of Tadanaga, the lord of the castle, but as a direct consequence of this combat a second duel took place immediately after, and again a few days later a third duel took place, and in all cases the confrontation resulted in bloodshed for the participants. To begin with, why did such a strange and extremely abominable duel had to take place?

From the perspective of posterity, one can only conclude that it was a trivial discussion that triggered this succession of duels to the death.

However, even if only superficially, it was a matter of life and death.

Although it may seem silly to an onlooker, perhaps each of the people involved had his or her own compelling reasons for doing so.

In the only reliable document on the circumstances of the precise day of the mourning — the codex mentioned above: *Secret Record of the Great Chancellor of Suruga*, the author merely describes the course of the duel.

As previously stated, the names of the duelists were Shibayama Hanbee and Kurita Hikotaro. There is no records about the second and third duels.

Consequently, to know the truth about what happened, we have no choice but to rely on what Kurita Hikotaro's younger brother Genjiro, who became a vassal of the Ikeda clan after the abolition of the clan of the great advisor of Suruga, wrote in his *Memo of the Duels of Kurita Nobufusa*.

According to the memorandum, Kurita Hikotaro was then 25 years old and when his father, Jirodayu Nobufusa, retired, he succeeded him as an instructor of archery of the Suruga fief.

On the other hand, Shibayama Hanbee had already passed his sixtieth birthday, but he had no intention of relinquishing his position to his first-born son, Shinzo Hisayasu, who was the same age as Hikotaro.

"As long as I am alive, I will not give up my post to a young man", he used to say, and so he continued his work as a horse trainer.

As is often the case with many older, stubborn people, Hanbee liked to brag about the warlike exploits of his youth, and as soon as few people got together, no matter how much they frowned thinking "Again?", he would always start telling stories about the battle of Sekigahara thirty years ago, or the siege of Osaka fifteen years earlier. And he would always conclude exultantly, saying:

—Today's young men only wield wooden swords in the *dojos*, so as they have no real combat experience they are worthless.

Now, the little battles Hanbee told had their share of truth. At the Battle of Sekigahara he was under the command of Tokugawa Ieyasu. He fought against the advancing troops of Otani Gyobu Yoshitaka, and took the head and helmet of a general. He did not take part in the winter campaign of the siege of Osaka, but in the summer campaign he held the bar with the troops under Ieyasu, who were retreating after the brutal attack of Sanada Saemonnojo, and killed Murakami Yasunobu, the brave warrior of the Sanada clan.

In the old days, his greatest adversary was Kurita Jirodayu. Both were the same age and competed against each other in the field of martial arts from a very young age. Jirodayu also stood out for his warlike exploits at the Battle of Sekigahara and in the two campaigns of the siege of Osaka. However, when he resigned from service of his feudal lord Ieyasu and moved to Suruga to serve Tadanaga, a great distance arose between their respective social positions. Hanbee, with a forked tongue and a bad reputation, was appointed as a horse trainer for a stipend of one hundred and thirty *roku*, while Jirodayu, sensible and friendly, became the archery instructor for a stipend of three hundred and fifty *roku*.

Hanbee was always deeply aware of this difference between their stipends. He was constantly jealous and argumentative:

"That wretch Kurita, even though he didn't do more feats than me, since he's good at sucking up, he has achieved a good position."

Jirodayu, on the other hand, was barely aware of the issue and was always willing to relate to his youthful friend regardless of what separated them,

but once Hanbee's feelings had been twisted, it was no longer going to be easy to mend them.

Without their being aware of it, a distance was gradually created between them. As a result of the mutual accusations, the friendship of the youth grew cold.

"What a weird guy!", Jirodayu always thought of Hanbee.

"He's just showing off!", Hanbee was always prejudiced.

The rivalry between the two definitely turned into a disagreement when Hanbee, at the request of his first-born son Shinzo, went to ask Jirodayu for the hand of his daughter Kiyo to marry his son, which Jirodayu opposed. Jirodayu's refusal of this marriage proposal was due to his knowledge of Hanbee's temperament, and he considered:

"A home with such a stubborn and intractable father-in-law is not suitable for my shy and timid Kiyo."

But Hanbee obviously didn't interpret it the same way:

"That cocky Kurita... he thinks my 150 *koku* is not up to his 350 *koku*."

Damn! Has he forgotten the old days?"

He, in his own way, loved his son Shinzo deeply, so the fact that he couldn't grant his longed-for wish filled him with anger. When he made that marriage proposal, if it was accepted, he even intended to "forgive that Kurita for his usual rudeness".

Once Jirodayu had retired and was succeeded by his son Hikotaro, Hanbee's resentment of the father turned to the son. He was hated for being Jirodayu's son alone, but even more so because, despite being the same age as his own son Shinzo, he was, according to him, doing nothing but "bragging" about the three hundred and fifty *koku* he received as an archery instructor, which he found even more infuriating.

All of these accumulated feelings exploded one day during a small conversation. As usual, Hanbee was explaining one of his little battles when he noticed that Hikotaro was among the attendants and unconsciously began to spill his intents:

—Today, learning the sword is child's play. What's the use of wielding a wooden sword and practicing only according to the patterns established for each stance? In a battle your opponent is a living being, and he is also a living being who is going to fight to the death, and there is no idiot who comes to order you to hit him according to the patterns. Ha, ha, ha! I have heard that lord Hikotaro has formidable swordsmanship in the Okakura *dojo* but what of the battlefield? Would fencing in the *dojo* be useful to him?

Hikotaro was somewhat puzzled and only forced a smile, but apparently Hanbee interpreted that forced smile as a mockery and continued:

—And, of course, since you only tap with the wooden sword, you can't tell who really deserves it. Aren't those who are the most talkative, rather than the most skilled, the ones who are getting better and better? Ha ha ha! But then, it's doesn't matter. Since the old days, instead of taking into account the achievements on the battlefield, those who always ascend are the ones do lip service the most.

It was a malicious insinuation implicitly directed at his father, Jirodayu. If only he had referred to him, since his companion was an older person, Hikotaro would have let it pass with a smile and without a word of complaint, but when he heard the latter, he tensed up.

—Shibayama, do you not think you have gone too far with your words? Hikotaro intended to end the conversation after these brief words of reproach, but his interlocutor, with the stubbornness characteristic of older people, kept insisting:

—Well! If I really was rude, I apologize. But can't you see how I am right in saying that the techniques you are taught in the *dojo* are of no practical use?

—There are no ways around the sword. Clumsy as I am, I am still not learning anything that cannot be useful in practice, — with his youth, as he momentarily freed himself from the discipline that repressed his emotions, Hikotaro's speech became incisive.

—What a rebuke. In that case, do you think you can match the techniques you have learned in the *dojo* with the skills I have developed in practice?

—If you wish...

—How interesting... Let's do it!

The abrupt turn that the conversation had taken took everyone present by surprise, and they tried to stop and appease them, but excitement reigned in their heads and they both turned a deaf ear.

—There is no better occasion than the tournament of duels to the death before the feudal lord on the twenty-fourth of September. To see what that dance of yours with the wooden sword is capable of, should you face me with a real sword.

—I accept the challenge.

—Well, I will fight as on the battlefield, wearing full armor, riding a horse, and wielding a real lance. Don't think I'll make it easy for you.

—I take that for granted. I'll put on armor too and fight you like a in real battle. And I won't make any handicaps just because you're too old.

—Don't forget those words.

When the two of them simultaneously requested to participate in the dueling tournament before the feudal lord, the advisor Saegusa Izunokami looked at them in surprise with eyes like dishes, but as soon as the lord informed the feudal lord, Tadanaga gave his approval on the spot.

—A duel to the death in armor is unusual. Let them face each other as they want.

II

The discussion that day spread immediately and reached the ears of the entire clan. All the young men, without exception, took pity on Hikotaro and cursed Hanbee. With his usual arrogance he had earned the displeasure of all of them, and in the same way, with his disparaging criticisms of the *dojo* techniques he had earned their fury.

—Although Hanbee is a man with much experience on the battlefield, he is now an old man in his sixties. There's no way he can keep up with Hikotaro.

—But it's not just Hanbee. All the senior vassals do nothing but put on airs, telling stories that are outdated and exaggerated to the maximum, and end up criticizing the young people of today. We must show them and make it clear to them how sharp the skills gained in the *dojo's* are.

—Hikotaro, for the honor of the Okakura *dojo*... What am I saying, for the honor of all of us young people: smash that stubborn old man!

With comments like these, everyone showed their support.

The older group, on the other hand, were not exactly sympathetic to Hanbee, but since the matter had taken the form of an older person against a young man, they naturally directed scathing criticism at Hikotaro.

—Do you really intend to fight a duel to the death with *dojo* trainee? Shibayama is a stubborn and incorrigible man, but his behavior on the battlefield is admirable.

—I feel sorry for Hikotaro, but perhaps it would be good to show those young men the reality of a battlefield for once.

—Hanbee, it's been a long time since you fought in armor. I am sure you will be eager to prove your prowess. You used to be so good. Don't even think about losing to this puppy.

Even older men who usually didn't have a very good relationship with him would encourage him.

In contrast to this irresponsible encouragement and flattery from others, however, the faces of the members of both families, the Shibayama and the Kurita, showed a much more serious expression.

When Hanbee told him all the details, his wife Tayo was stunned and reproached him in tears:

—But how old do you think you are? You have just reached the age where, with nothing a little cold, your hips hurt and your shoulders stiffen... And you intend to fight a duel with real swords against young Hikotaro, who is in the prime of his life? What an irresponsible man!

Even his son Shinzo argued:

—Father, I know Hikotaro's ability well. His skill is considerable, and he is especially good at dueling. Not that I question your technique, father, but in the hypothetical event that the duel is too long, it is clear that a young person is more likely to endure it, — he became pale at this quite sensitive point.

Only Hanbee kept up the enthusiasm:

—Don't talk nonsense! Although I am still in my sixties, my body is now well seasoned. I cannot be defeated by an infantile children of today. I'll teach him the difference between practicing with a wooden stick and fighting in a true bloodshed.

When both Tayo and Shinzo asked if something could not be done to stop the duel, the look on Hanbee's face was so horrifying that it was scary just to look at it.

—Cowards! And you are the wife and son of a samurai? Do you think it would be proper for a samurai like me to back out at this point from what I have already proclaimed to so many people and requested from the *daimyo's* advisor himself?

Seeing his veins swollen across his forehead and his fists trembling as he clenched them tightly, the wife and son were silent.

The same family conflict was repeated in the Kurita house. When Hikotaro returned from the castle and told them the news, his father Jirodayu frowned in horror.

—How reckless, Hikotaro! Do you know what you've got yourself into? Why didn't you just smile and let it go?

—That was my intention, but then he began to make disparaging and malicious remarks about your war exploits, father, and then I could no longer keep quiet.

—I had already retired and had made up my mind not to pay any attention to what Shibayama might say. You behaved like a fool.

—No, father. It's not just about what happened today. I've been repressing

my anger at Hanbee's frequent slander for a long time. This had to happen sooner or later.

—I'm the one who knows Hanbee's skill best. He was a guy who would run amok like a badly wounded beast as soon as he stepped onto the battlefield.

—You're saying I'm not up to it and it could be dangerous?

—I'm not saying that your ability is immature. I am merely saying that there is a huge difference between a duel and a real combat.

As an old man who had also stepped onto the battlefield, Jirodayu was skeptical of the effectiveness of *dojo* swordsmanship.

—He will not defeat me in any way, — Hikotaro replied, indignant at such an underestimation of *dojo* fencing by none other than his own father.

Genjiro, Hikotaro's younger brother, trusted unconditionally in his older brother's triumph and looked at him with sparkling eyes as he spoke hopefully, but his younger sister Kiyo felt more complex emotions and was sad and confused. And it was not only because she knew that Shinzo, the son of Hanbee, loved her ardently, but also because she reciprocated his love.

Their early love started and flourished when they were both children and shared innocent games, before relations between the Shibayama and Kurita families grew worse. When her father refused the Shibayama family's proposal of marriage, Kiyo shed tears in secret. In those days, no one could in the least contradict a father's decision.

But Kiyo had not completely given up on Shinzo, and was convinced that one day her father would change his mind. There was even a thought that sometimes appeared in a corner of her heart and made her blush: "If there was any way that old Hanbee would disappear..."

And lo and behold, the subject of mourning came up. If Hanbee and Hikotaro fought a duel, whoever won (or rather, whoever killed their opponent), the union between her and Shinzo would become absolutely impossible.

Of course, she prayed for the victory of her older brother, but would not that victory make her the sister of Shinzo's irreconcilable enemy? Despair seized Kiyo with its fearsome claws.

As the day of the duel approached, she was indifferent to the emotions of everyone involved.

III

From that day on, violent shouts constantly echoed inside the Shibayama family residence. Hanbee and Shinzo, both clad in armor, were conducting combat training.

Obviously, instead of a real spear Hanbee used a safe spear, with a padded tip, and Shinzo used a wooden sword instead of a steel one, but apart from that the training was done with all the intensity of real combat. If Hanbee started to do this kind of practice at this point, it was in no way because he felt unsure of his abilities. On the contrary, his intention was to reassure Shinzo and Tayo by showing them his competence. On top of that, however, in many cases the intense practice in itself of emulating real combat made him feel a great sense of exhilaration as he relived the glory of his youth.

As you might expect, Hanbee's spearhead was very nimble. So much so that it even surprised Shinzo.

—Here I come, Shinzo! — Hanbee announced in a loud voice before launching his spear attack.

His technique did not follow any specific style, but was something he had acquired naturally in the midst of the recurring life-and-death struggles on the battlefield. For that reason alone, Shinzo, who wielded his blade in established patterns, found it an unexpected and extremely violent form of fighting, capable of striking and stabbing him indiscriminately through every accessible part of his body.

—What do you think, Shinzo? No matter how hard you try to strike at the face, torso or forearm like you've learned in the *dojo*, on the battlefield that does absolutely nothing for you. The face is covered by the helmet and face shield, and both the torso and forearms are protected by leather and metal plates. Whether you're hitting or cutting, you have no choice but to target the chinks in your opponent's armour. The best places are in the crotch or under the armpit. But when even that fails, you have to hit your opponent above the helmet with all your might, or push him in the chest until he is pulled from the horse.

And he proved that he was right in everything he said. With spectacular strength not befitting an old man, he gave Shinzo a powerful blow to the head with the hilt of the lance that blurred his vision, and when he received a violent thrust to the chest he lay on the ground in a state of anxiety.

And when he pointed it deftly at his crotch or armpits, there was hardly any way of protecting himself.

Shinzo tasted deeply the ferocity of the real battle and appreciated with new eyes the true skill of his father.

"If he fights like this, even Hikotaro will not be able to cope", he thought to himself, and when he expressed this conviction to his father, Hanbee boasted, with a wide smile on his face:

—It's only logical, I'm more experienced.

On the other hand, the situation at the Kurita house was totally different. Although Jirodayu agreed to tell Hikotaro about his own experiences on the battlefield, it seemed as if he was simply trying to idly recall his own exploits of old. Hikotaro, for his part, tried diligently to extract information from him, and sometimes even asked him for practical guidance, but he always received the same response.

—There is no need, — Jirodayu answered and stared at his son's face with a strangely confused look.

Hikotaro had no choice but to go to the Okakura *dojo* where, besides receiving the encouragement of his companions, he had to be content with giving himself to the same practices as always and receiving some advice from instructor Okakura.

Okakura, in spite of being thirty-something years old, did not have any experience on the battlefield. Therefore, all his advice was just second-hand information that he had heard from older colleagues, and one could say that all his suggestions were summarized in the following point:

—After all, your opponent is an old man. The most sensible thing to do is to try to extend the fight as long as possible and wait for your opponent to become exhausted.

Meanwhile, despite the superficial appearance of total serenity, a far more intense struggle was going on inside Jirodayu than the one that occupied the busy Hanbee day after day with the preparations for the duel.

He had had the opportunity to witness his old friend's fighting form on the battlefield to the fullest. He recognized perfectly the devotion to the blade of his own son Hikotaro and was even secretly proud of it, but he found it difficult to imagine that his son could defeat this battle-hardened Hanbee, and even face him with a real sword and spear.

Since the untimely death of his wife, he had devoted himself entirely to raising Hikotaro and enjoying watching him grow up, facing all odds, without ever marrying again.

When he retired voluntarily, even though he was still in a position to continue serving, he did so for Hikotaro too, because he wanted to

introduce him to society soon and begin to build a future for him. Fortunately, after succeeding him in his post, Hikotaro gained a good reputation as a very skilled man despite his youth. In his old age, this was what brought him the greatest joy.

But at the moment all that was in danger of coming to nothing. And not only that, but Hikotaro's own life was facing almost certain destruction. The thought of it clouded Jirodayu's heart, but hid it beneath a mask of feigned serenity.

—That Shibayama... Who could tell me...

Over the past few years, Jirodayu had unwittingly accumulated a hatred of Hanbee because of his unpleasant behavior. Suddenly, the floodgate of the dam that contained him opened and the hatred overflowed into intense indignation. Jirodayu remembered an image of Hanbee in his mind that showed him his teeth.

No matter how much he thought about it, he concluded that Hikotaro had no chance of winning, so Jirodayu made a firm resolution:

"Shibayama, you'll see. It's me you're going to face."

He was determined, but thinking a bit, he realized that it would be impossible to convince Hikotaro to consent to fight in his place. Late at night, as he watched the gloomy shadows cast by the lamp swinging from the ceiling, Jirodayu thought about how to make it happen.

IV

It was already September twenty-third, so Tayo, thinking about the expected duel the next day, suggested to her husband:

—Today you could take it easy and get some rest.

But Hanbee on the other hand, as if those words had made him even more obstinate, continued with his daily practices.

After fiddling with Shinzo as he pleased, a fully satisfied Hanbee removed his armour and wiped the sweat from his skin, but as he went up from the garden into the outer corridor, he miscalculated his pace and suddenly fell to the ground. Apparently, he received a blow to the hip bone.

He shouted involuntarily at that moment and when the night came he could not even move. His chronic neuralgia had reappeared.

So far it had always resurfaced with the change of season. It didn't do him any good that in the early morning, the weather suddenly began to cool down. But the way he fell after exercising his bones and muscles so intensely also influenced his condition.

The pain was so unbearable that he could not even stand up to go to the

toilet. He knew perfectly well from his own experience that no treatment existed so far that would be quick and effective. He had no choice but to wait until the pain healed naturally as the days went by, or else the pain would disappear completely at any moment as if by magic.

Hanbee was exasperated as he laid on his bed and grinded his teeth. The day began to dawn and the time of morning approached.

"By noon I have to do whatever it takes to at least get on my feet. If only I can get up, I'll endure any pain and rush to the castle."

He groaned, panted, screamed, and shouted, but as if the inside of his muscles from his hips to his upper limbs had been transformed into a heavy mass of lead, he was unable to rise even a few inches from his bed. Still...

—Let us go and talk to the adviser and ask him to postpone today's duel,
— Tayo suggested.

—Bah, don't be silly! Can I do such a thing at this point? It would seem that I have chickened out before, and that would be a worse disgrace even than death.

—But being a disease...

—Shut up! Send for a palanquin, then you'll help me up and accompany me to the castle. And when I enter the dueling area, you'll see that I'll stand up straight, as if I was on the battlefield.

Hanbee attempted to rise by force, but ended up lying again in acute pain. Shinzo, who was standing beside him staring at him, summoned up his courage and made a proposal:

—Father, I will replace you and duel Hikotaro in your place.

—What?!

—When we meet in the *dojo*, Hikotaro and I are evenly matched... Well, he might have a bit of an advantage over me. But in a duel with real swords and armor, having trained hard with you, I think I have a good chance of winning.

—Hmmm...

—I've also come to terms with the fierce and unconventional nature of fighting in a real battle. As far as I know, Hikotaro has continued to go exclusively to the *dojo*, so perhaps he is unaware of the heroic fighting technique of real combat. I am firmly convinced that I can beat him. Father, allow me to face him in your place.

—Even so, at this point we cannot go to the Counselor and tell him that you will go out in my place.

—It's not necessary. If I put on the helmet and face shield, by the height and even by the tone of voice I can pass as you. I will participate under

your name, Shibayama Hanbee Takahisa, and I will defeat Hikotaro completely.

It was already approaching midday, and they had not yet decided what action to take. Finally, Hanbee agreed to have Shinzo replace him.

—You know, Shinzo. Don't forget the way of fighting that I have been showing you all these days. No stances, no methods, just throw yourself recklessly into a collision with your opponent with your whole body. If you do it the way I did, you can win for sure. — Hanbee repeated these instructions again, redundantly, as Shinzo said goodbye to him before he left, having donned his armor.

At the same time, the Kurita house was also experiencing some unforeseen circumstances.

As the hour approached, Hikotaro was putting on his armor with the help of his younger brother Genjiro and his younger sister Kiyo, under the silent gaze of his father Jirodayu. Since the day before, Jirodayu had become strangely taciturn and it seemed that something was going on in his head, but now he was simply watching carefully, and smiling amusingly, as Hikotaro's figure was gradually covered with the armor. When they had finished dressing him, however, he said suddenly in a gentle tone of voice:

—No, this is not good...

—What? What? — asked Hikotaro in surprise.

—That's not right... At first glance the armor may pass, but the crucial parts are not well attached. It would all fall apart in the middle of the fight. Let me fix it for you, — he stood up, took off Hikotaro's armor, and even took off his shin guards, — Starting with the tie of the armour, everything is wrong.

After saying this, Jirodayu, who was standing in front of Hikotaro, suddenly pushed him forward, sat on him and tied his hands with one of the ropes.

—Father, what are you doing? — Hikotaro shouted, stupefied, but from the impact of the surprise he could not even resist.

—Hikotaro, forgive me, but I will take part in today's duel in your place,

— Jirodayu excused himself after he had pinned his son down.

—What are you saying, father?

—I've held a grudge against Hanbee for a decade. I felt like facing him in a duel sometime, but in these times of peace there was no more occasion

for that. If I let this opportunity slip away, I will not have another one to take revenge and get rid of this grudge. Let me do this duel.

—I can't, father. It would be a disgrace for me. Father, please untie me. Genjiro, Kiyo, untie this rope.

—I forbid Genjiro and Kiyo to lay a single finger on the rope your father has tied. If they disobeyed their father's order, I would disinherit them until their deaths.

—Father, father, I beg you, don't make me look like a coward.

—Calm down. I will participate in the duel on your behalf, as Kurita Hikotaro Yoshiyuki. If there's anyone who knows Hanbee's fighting style perfectly, it's me. I will return after I have beaten him.

Turning a deaf ear to Hikotaro's pleas and fury, Jirodayu put on his own armor and helmet, donned his face shield, and after reiterating to Genjiro and Kiyo the order not to touch the rope that restrained Hikotaro, mounted the horse and headed for the castle.

V

Immediately after the end of the third match of the afternoon, in which Komura Gennosuke of the *Hangan* style managed to break the curtain on Buzaemon Shindo of the *Shinto* style and gave his opponent a fatal cut in the neck with his impressive hurricane sword, the beginning of the fourth match in the evening was announced.

—On the west side, Shibayama Hanbee Takahisa.

In response to the call of Hirose Kyohei, the announcer of the participants, who actually advanced through the curtains, protected by armor and on the back of a majestic horse, was Shibayama Shinzo Hisayasu.

The other participant was announced then.

—On the east side, Kurita Hikotaro Yoshiyuki.

Needless to say, in response to this call, the one who showed up equally armed and on horseback was Hikotaro's father, Jirodayu Nobufusa.

Both had their entire bodies covered by armor and helmets, and had worn protective masks as well, so one might think that no one would notice their true identities. But even so, Shinzo leaned forward slightly, intending to look like an older man, and Jirodayu intentionally stuck out his chest to give the impression of being a boy.

Obviously, all those present without exception, beginning with the lord of Sunpu castle who was sitting in the main stand, were firmly convinced that the participants who had appeared were the people whose names had been announced.

The only thing that some people noticed was that Shibayama, who was assumed to be a spearman, appeared wielding a long sword in his right hand, while Kurita, whose specialty was supposed to be the long sword, appeared wielding a spear, which surprised them. But those doubts also disappeared completely once, at the first sign of the drums, the horses of both warriors rushed towards their opponent, and all looked up to the combat.

The fight to the death between these two opponents was totally different from all previous duels. This time there were none of those stifling moments of silence as both rivals looked at one another fiercely, on guard with their sword or spear, and slowly approached one another waiting for the right moment. They simply crossed paths again and again, riding on the back of their horses, like a hurricane or a whirlwind, and with their *katana* or spear they would strike, push, and collide with one another. Surrounded by a cloud of dust rising from the ground, the horses and the men, the lance and the *katana*, danced, shone, ran... The brief grunts and the sound of colliding metals were all that made one think of a clash between the lives of the two.

Since Shinzo believed his opponent was Hikotaro, he was astonished at the fearsome skill of his spear.

"How could he have acquired such intense impetuosity so quickly? That spear is on a par with my father", he thought, astonished.

No doubt if he hadn't been training day after day, his opponent's spear would have knocked him down at the first moment. He put all his efforts into making a reckless and even thoughtless attack on his opponent, instead of simply remaining on the defensive by repelling his spear. Shinzo was sure that, knowing Hikotaro and also knowing that Hikotaro thought his opponent was his father Hanbee, his intention would be to prolong the duel and wait for the old man to run out of breath. So he was determined not to play along with him and settle the matter quickly and decisively through the strategy of surprise attack.

Jirodayu, on the other hand, thought his opponent was his old friend Hanbee, although he had doubts from the beginning that he had come without his spear, and then he was surprised at his fighting manner, which was so remarkably sloppy for someone like Hanbee, who was supposed to be experienced in battle. If this were the Hanbee of old that he knew, even if he fought recklessly and chaotically, he would spontaneously demonstrate an ingenious and incomparable strategy. And that was precisely what he feared most. But the opponent he took for Hanbee, though he was brimming with courage, gave him the impression that he

was completely thoughtless, as if he was a boy unfamiliar with the battlefield, following a tactic that would lead him to a violent death.

"Shibayama, do not be impatient", he thought and felt a certain relief.

After a dozen or so clashes, his skillfully planned and calculated attack eventually sank unerringly into the inner thigh of his opponent.

As soon as Shinzo's body began to swing visibly, Jirodayu hit him with his lance on the side without wasting a minute. When Shinzo could not resist any longer on his horse and fell heavily to the ground, immediately the tip of Jirodayu's lance pierced his throat.

Amidst the sudden ovation of the audience, Jirodayu went forward and, with the lance dripping with blood under his arm, bowed to them, but fearing that his impersonation might be discovered, he immediately left the enclosure on the back of his horse, before the spectators could even be surprised.

By the time Jirodayu returned to the entrance of his residence, his sons Hikotaro, Genjiro, and Kiyo were already on their way out. By this time Hikotaro had finally freed himself from the rope that held him down, had severely scolded his brother and sister, and was about to leave the house.

—Father!

—Hikotaro, calm down. I killed Hanbee.

Genjiro shouted with joy at his father's gallant comment. Kiyo, instead, groaned and sank her face into the sleeve of her kimono.

Hikotaro and Genjiro accompanied Jirodayu into the house and as they helped him take off his armor, asked him in chorus about the details of the duel. Jirodayu told them proudly about his hard fought battle, but suddenly he realized something and looked around.

—Where is Kiyo?

—Oh, damn it!

Hikotaro ran immediately outside. There was no sign of Kiyo.

"She must have gone to see Shinzo. She will apologize to him, and if he does not forgive her, she will kill herself", Hikotaro sensed at once, for he knew perfectly well the heartbreaking love Kiyo felt.

So he ran at once to the Shibayama residence.

Just at the same time, Shinzo's body was being transported from the castle to the Shibayama's home. The umpire Sone Masatomo was greatly surprised to learn that the person who lay despondent was not Hanbee but Shinzo. He preferred to postpone the inspection of this circumstance on part of the lord of the castle, Tadanaga, and move the body as soon as possible.

—Damn Hikotaro! — shouted Hanbee as he saw Shinzo's body with its throat brutally punctured, and instantly rose to his feet.

Strangely enough, at that moment the stiffness that had made his muscles look like blocks of steel and the intense pain that had gnawed at the flesh of his hips disappeared completely.

—If only I could have lifted this body half an hour earlier... — Hanbee lamented as he clenched his teeth and stared at the back of Tayo, who was sobbing as she hugged Shinzo's neck, — I'm going to duel that wretch Hikotaro right now and avenge Shinzo's death!

After saying this, he immediately took up his spear and without even putting on his shoes, only with the *tabi*²⁸ on, left the house in a hurry. And less than a hundred yards away he came upon the very rival in question, Hikotaro, who was grabbing his sister Kiyo by the arm to bring her home.

—Hey, you, Hikotaro!

As he looked up at the man who was calling him, Hikotaro was stunned and could not believe his eyes, for he had before him Hanbee, whom his father had allegedly killed, armed with a huge spear.

"Oh! Hanbee sent a replacement too?"

Hikotaro was astonished at such a coincidence, but seeing Hanbee's altered behavior, on guard with his spear, he naturally had no intention of fleeing back.

—Kiyo, step aside! — he ordered his sister, and drew his long sword.

The duel was resolved in an instant.

Hanbee ran, imbued with a fighting spirit that boiled throughout his body, fueled by his thirst for vengeance. He aimed at his enemy and thrust his sharp spear into a Hikotaro who had abruptly drawn his sword and was not at all prepared to face him. The spear sank into Hikotaro's side and he collapsed immediately.

—What, Hikotaro? Have you learned the difference between *dojo* swordplay and real combat before you go to the next world? — Hanbee groaned in a sobbing voice.

That same night, Jirodayu went to Hanbee and handed him a letter of challenge. Hanbee immediately accepted the proposal: to fight to the death with his spears as they had done twenty years before, carrying an armor and on the back of a horse. Having lost his only son, Hanbee had also lost all desire to continue living.

The duel between the two took place at sunset the next day, on the banks of the Abe River, just outside the castle, without involving anyone else.

²⁸ Traditional Japanese socks. They are still used with traditional footwear.

The only people who witnessed the deadly combat between the two late-night warriors on their horses were several people who happened to be passing by, but according to the *Memo of the Duels of Kurita Nobufusa*: "It is said that they could not help but feel overwhelmed and totally paralyzed by fear as they watched that terrible scene."

The same memorandum also indicates that after a time of fighting, Jirodayu's horse stumbled over a stone and twisted its front leg, at which point Hanbee took advantage of hitting Jirodayu on the side, but even as he fell to the ground he managed to stab Hanbee in the crotch. But since the author of such a narrative is Genjiro, it is not clear whether he can be given full credibility.

But what surely must be admitted as an undoubted fact is that eventually both of them drew their short swords while rolling on the ground, stabbed each other, and in the end ended up exhausted and collapsed simultaneously.

When the samurai of the clan arrived in a hurry after being warned by a passerby, each had his short sword stuck in the body of the other, entangled in a jumble of armor, both already dead.

HAGEN NO HIDACHI

(«The illusion-breaking secret sword»)

I

Shimanosuke stared into Kayo's pupils with his eyes, slanting, eyelashes thick and looking half-asleep.

She sensed a deep, bottomless chasm in his eyes. A sensual magnetism she could barely resist was forcibly drawing her in. Shimanosuke himself too sensed that through his eyes an intense desire was spreading throughout his body, like an electric shock, directed at Kayo, so passionate to make her lose consciousness.

—Kayo...

From Shimanosuke's lips a small voice escaped, so low it could barely be heard. He placed his right hand on Kayo's shoulder, even though his palm was shaking slightly.

—Oh, — a short scream-like murmur came from the woman's throat.

Kayo's entire body was facing Shimanosuke and broke down like it was going to melt.

"He's a man, but his skin is so white and eyes so seductively moist; still, he has a sinister air around him", thought Kayo. She had heard that he was a womanizer, once she heard even his father claim that he was very skilled but dishonest. However, all measures taken to protect her heart dissolved faster than a light spring snowfall.

Kayo looked up at Shimanosuke.

—Shimanosuke! — she whispered.

From that moment on her fate was sealed.

Suddenly they heard footsteps coming.

—Kayo, tonight, at time of the boar.

These words remained in her mind and once the man had left in a hurry, Kayo prostrated herself, completely exhausted, on the part of the tatami where he was sitting, that still retained its warmth.

A sensual throbbing, which she had not yet experienced, together with a stubborn feeling of love which drove her on no matter what, caused a pleasant ecstasy to run through the immature body of the seventeen year old girl to the tips of her limbs.

That night Kayo tried to control the shaking in her legs, opened a sliding door, and in front of a room in one of the houses, in the row of houses north of the mansion, whispered his name.

Shimanosuke appeared and embraced her. He held her in his arms. His eyes, unlike his expression during the day, now glowed and burned with undisguised desire, reminding of the moment when a ravenous beast pounces on its prey.

The lamp was out, so all Kayo could sense were his white cheeks, floating in the blackness, and his breath, burning like a flame. In the midst of the darkness Shimanosuke held her tightly in his arms and untied her obi.

Kayo had returned to her chambers four hours later, and slept until dawn, swarmed by flashes of every color.

At the same time Shimanosuke's pleasant stupor was gradually spreading through his limbs as of a man who had completely released the passion that had long plagued and boiled throughout his body.

Upon waking he stared at the ceiling with a smile on his lips. He always felt a refreshing vitality pouring out of him at moments like these.

Shimanosuke felt that he was a totally different man than the day before. He went out into the garden, came to the well and poured bucket after bucket of ice-cold water over his naked body.

Then he picked up his wooden sword and practiced hundreds of strokes with it. His white cheeks became a pink, like the clouds of a dawn that the sun shines on from inside.

He entered the *dojo* and waited for the arrival of his master, Kasama Jinzaemon.

—Master, I have perfected the technique and I would like to show it to you, — as he said this, looking up at his master, with strong fighting spirit showing in his eyes.

—Huh... — Jinzaemon got a slight smile from the corners of his mouth. Surely what he was suggesting was that a new technique is not so easily mastered.

Yet as soon as Jinzaemon took up his wooden sword and stood before Shimanosuke, he became astonished, completely, as if he saw it with different eyes.

Both the mental dullness that haunted Shimanosuke until just the day before and the impatience of the tip of his blade have disappeared without a trace. Now he was still and sober, and his three-foot wooden blade was imbued with a solemn, lethal aura, as if it was made of freshly polished steel.

Silently, Jinzaemon made the tip of his wooden sword descend a little and put guard on with the sword at half height. Shimanosuke suddenly advanced his left foot half a step, wielded his sword high to the side in a straight line, and placed his left hand lightly on the body of the sword.

"An inexperienced young man facing his master..."

The outrage spread to the tip of the Jinzaemon blade and, like a bird of prey taking flight in the tree, he pushed his wooden blade forward and it seemed certain it would plunge it into Shimanosuke's throat. Just then, however, the sound of the two blades colliding came out, and Jinzaemon's blade slipped out of his hands, following a downward trajectory to the right.

He groaned and jumped back about six feet. His left wrist was swollen and red.

—I have mastered the *Shigi no Hakaeshi* ("The Counterattack from the Side Path") technique, — Shimanosuke announced, smiling and exultant, after returning the sword to its sheath on his left hip.

Even among all the techniques of the *Shinto* and *Kasumi* schools, "the counterattack from the side path" is considered the most difficult, a technique so commendable that it did not receive any criticism ever.

Jinzaemon opened his eyes like a plate, not so much because of the unexpected blow or the intense pain in his wrist, but rather because of the incredible progress of Shimanosuke.

—Sasajima, that was wonderful. How skilfully you worked and how well you managed to perfect the technique!

—Thank you, — Shimanosuke bowed his head respectfully, but was actually laughing cruelly inwardly as he thought, "If only the master knew the real reason *why* I suddenly mastered my secret sword technique".

As soon as it became known that Shimanosuke had defeated the master with "the counterattack from the side path", the news caused quite an agitation within the *dojo*.

—What a weird story to tell about!

—Just out of the blue...

—It's a fearsome technique, one of a kind...

After noon, Kayo noticed Shimanosuke's figure in the hallway. Her cheeks blushed immediately and he ran towards Shimanosuke.

—Shimanosuke, congratulations, — her joy at this man's victory was far greater than her sadness at her own father's defeat.

Shimanosuke stared at Kayo's face with wide eyes. The expression in those eyes was cold and translucent, as if they had left no trace of the yearning or passion of the previous night. He stared for a moment at Kayo's face, which burned with love, with a strange expression, as if looking at a stranger, and then left without a word.

Five days after that, in the evening, Kayo took her life.

Since she left no notes, Jinzaemon could not think of a single reason that could have led his beloved, innocent daughter to suicide, but whispers began to emerge among his disciples.

—Kayo died because of Sasajima.

—I'm sure I saw Kayo clinging to Sasajima while he was saying something to her.

—Wasn't it because that womanizer cheated on Kayo?

Obviously no one knew that Kayo spent four hours in Shimanosuke's room, but everyone suspected that there had been something between the two of them.

Shimanosuke was summoned to Jinzaemon's room, and was rigorously interrogated.

"I don't know" and "I don't know anything about it" were his only answers.

There really wasn't a single piece of evidence to incriminate him.

However, Shimanosuke's unnatural coldness during the questioning gave unnatural impression and only intensified the doubts about him. When Shimanosuke vanished unexpectedly from the Kasama *dojo* one day, surrounded by a melancholy and distressing atmosphere, everyone reversed their doubts to absolute certainty and outrage.

II

Sasajima Shimanosuke was a cursed man. Or, to be more specific, it were the women who fell under his spell and ill-fated destiny.

Sasajima Shimanosuke was the second son of Sasajima Chubei, vassal to Date Masamune with a stipend of three hundred and twenty *koku*. He lost his parents at an early age and, since he was a boy, began to receive the teachings of Tada Umanosuke of the *Shinto* style. Soon he surpassed his senior peers and showed magnificent progress.

When Shimanosuke was only nineteen years old, his teacher gave him a certificate stating that he had been initiated into the techniques of the school.

One day, Umanosuke turned to Shimanosuke and asked him:

—Sasajima, do you harbor any hard thoughts inside your mind?

The master's words were cordial, for he held his sword technique in high regard and had a deep affection for the boy, but Shimanosuke raised his eyes wide and only answered:

—Nothing... In particular.

—Are you sure? Well, it's better that way... But lately I can see a certain amount of agitation in the tip of your sword. The other day I thought of introducing you to the Kasumi Takirata ("Water Falling from the Waterfall") technique, but that made me wonder.

—There's nothing to worry about. I'd like to be initiated into that technique without any delay.

—No. Even if you don't have any personal concerns, if you don't see it, there is still something deep in your heart that is troubling your spirit. What the path of the sword shuns most is hesitation. We will wait until the clouds at the bottom of your heart have completely cleared.

Shimanosuke stood in awe of his master's keen clairvoyance. He had no concerns, but there was certainly something that disturbed him, shook his heart and weakened him to the point of exhaustion. And that "something" was Michi, the youngest daughter of the neighbor next door, Yamanaka Kyunoshin.

Whether Shimanosuke was awake or asleep, the figure of Michi was always present before his eyes or in corner of his mind. He was fully aware of this issue, but when another person pointed out that it was also showing itself in his swordsmanship, Shimanosuke was stunned by the fact.

That same day, upon returning from the *dojo*, Shimanosuke stood in the garden, absorbed, pondering the dialogue he had had with the master.

"I have to do something about it. I should completely forget about women", he thought. But then he added in his mind, "I can't; whatever I do, I can't get them out of my mind".

As he anxiously shook his head, he heard a voice calling him.

—Shimanosuke! — Michi showed her white, small, pleasant face across the fence, — Shimanosuke, what are you thinking about, with that sad look?

—I was thinking about you, — the words came out of his mouth with unexpected frankness.

—Oh!

Michi's candid, youthful face turned instantly into a face of a woman and she blushed with embarrassment and glee. The light emanating from Shimanosuke's eyes penetrated Michi's entire body and made her feel as if all her muscles were numb.

Perhaps that mysterious fascination that appeared in Shimanosuke's eyes when he gazed upon the woman he loved was something innate. Be that as it may, it was not a look he consciously adopted. Shimanosuke had fallen in love on countless occasions, but each time — at least at the start — he

desired the woman with all his heart. It was the purity and ardor of that desire that made those eyes that watched the beloved woman glow like a star with a boundless longing, deep as a demonic abyss. But as soon as that fervent love was fulfilled, it always melted away, like a snowflake falling on the embers of a fire.

It is not known how the relationship between Shimanosuke and Michi developed, but what is clear is that shortly after that first confession of their love, Shimanosuke enjoyed Michi's body at his leisure, pure as a bud that has barely begun to bloom.

The morning after tasting Michi's body, Shimanosuke took up his wooden sword and stood motionless in the midst of the pristine atmosphere of the sunrise.

There was no longer a trace of Michi's presence that had floated along the edge of his *katana* just the day before as an illusion that would not go away no matter how hard he tried to shake it off. His warrior's spirit was now serene and filled with his two-foot wooden sword. He felt renewed, as if the blindfold had suddenly fallen off.

When he entered the *dojo* and presented himself to his master, Umanosuke was in awe of what he saw. That same day Shimanosuke was initiated into the Kasumi technique of "water falling from the waterfall".

About four months after this, Michi's brother, Yamanaka Chikara, visibly affected, passed Shimanosuke by the moat as he returned from the *dojo*.

—Sasajima, as a samurai, I'd like to know what your real intentions are. What do you plan to do with Michi?

—I'm sorray about her.

—That's all you can say, Sasajima, that you're sorry? Bastard! Is that all you can say? Is that all you're going to do?

—Yamanaka, forgive me, but there's nothing can be done about it anymore.

—Why? Why don't we appoint a suitable person to act as a go-between and you marry Michi? At the moment, things can still be straightened out.

—Huh?

—Michi is pregnant. Were you going to let it go by pretending you didn't know?

—Michi... Pregnant?

"If we only made love once...", Shimanosuke thought, stunned.

—You're an adulterer and a scoundrel! With your pale face and your sweet talk, you tricked the young Michi, you played with her as you pleased, and after disposing of her as you pleased, you changed your mind and began to treat her with indifference. What are you going to do with Michi? And

what are you going to do to cleanse the honor of the Yamanaka family that you have sullied?

—Yamanaka, I did not play with Miss Michi. I loved her sincerely.

—In that case, why didn't you come to ask for her hand?

—Not even I understand my heart. Right now I don't have any relationship with the Michi I loved so madly. I feel as if she now a stranger.

—What a scoundrel! How can you talk so brazenly? Anyway, it doesn't matter what you think. There's only one way to wash the Yamanaka family's honour and save Michi's life: marry her.

—That won't happen.

—What?!

—There's a woman I'm going to be in love with for life.

Because of his extremely unexpected remark and the coldness with which he pronounced it, Chikara stared for a few moments at Shimanosuke's beautiful but soulless face with stunned look, as if he could not believe his ears. Then, however, a violent rage made his arms shaking.

—Bastard! — he shouted in a thunderous voice, then drew and attacked with a single movement of his sword.

But Shimanosuke took advantage of this upward movement in a diagonal direction to the right and inflicted a deep cut on Chikara's side. After this, Shimanosuke fled the city, accompanied by an older woman.

Nine years passed and Shimanosuke showed magnificent progress in his technique. He received instruction in the seven sword techniques of the *Shinto* style, the seven long sword techniques of the *Kasumi* style and the four of the *Ma* style. In total, eighteen techniques. After that he devoted himself to perfecting five secret techniques, namely *Daikage* ("The Great Shadow"), *Hanatai* ("The Flower Crusher"), *Ryuryo* ("The Clear Sound"), *Koshi* ("Shining Pride"), and *Daikyoka* ("The Highest Peak"). But with each secret technique he mastered he accompanied it with the sacrifice of a beautiful woman.

At almost regular intervals of about half a year, Shimanosuke would hit a barrier in the way of the sword that prevented him from moving forward. It was like a cloud that rose diffusely at the edge of his blade, swirling around and bewitching him.

In these moments he was always infatuated with a beautiful woman. He gave himself body and soul to the woman and burned with passion for her. The mirage of the woman floated in the midst of the cloud that appeared

before the tip of his sword, cutting him off, and no matter how hard he tried to tear it or stab it, he could not get rid of it.

Women had always succumbed to diabolical beauty of his face, and as soon as he managed to satisfy the passions that had been repressed until then, the woman's illusion vanished and the dark cloud disappeared completely. Immediately a wide path opened up before him, through which he managed to master a new secret fencing technique.

The desire he had felt for the woman immediately cooled down as if by magic, and he began to show a total lack of interest in the woman he had worked so hard to obtain.

Many young girls and married women received priceless but deep wounds in this way for the benefit of his blade, and some of them ended up taking their own lives. Kayo, the daughter of Kasama Jinzaemon, being one of them.

"My love is cursed."

There were times when Shimanosuke pondered and whispered such things to himself, but he allowed himself to be convinced by an inner voice that he could do nothing about it, so he fell in love again with another woman, whom he used as a springboard to polish his increasingly robust and terrible sword technique.

III

Shimanosuke had to give up his service as a samurai in several fiefdoms (according to him, because of his cursed sword; but from the others' point of view, because of the women he hopped around) and wandered around until he reached Edo in the spring of the sixth year of the Kan'ei era (1629).

As soon as he set foot in Edo, he heard an alarming rumor: since the previous year, a samurai had been roaming the city at will every night, killing anyone who crossed his path.

Originally, since the Genna era (1615-1624), the *ronin*, who had been virtually deprived of the opportunity to get a new lord to serve, had trouble providing for their basic needs, so they began to commit indiscriminate robberies on passersby. This came to the attention of a group of impetuous men, who set themselves up among themselves:

—Well, let's get rid of those criminals who go around killing people.

But they went for wool and came out shorn, for as they wandered about the city at night they were hooked on the fun of attacking defenceless passers-by.

This practice of indiscriminately attacking passers-by, known as *tsujigiri*, with time, became popular.

As it was written in the *Register of Chronology of Edo Region*:

"Starting this year, samurai and guard posts are to be set up everywhere due to the constant occurrence of *tsujigiri*."

As this chronicle explains, the guard posts, which would henceforth become an indispensable part of Edo city's appearance, were established to mitigate this fearsome trend of indiscriminate killings.

When Shimanosuke arrived in Edo, these checkpoints had not yet been set up. It was the golden age of *tsujigiri*, so to speak.

Needless to say, as soon as he heard the rumors, Shimanosuke immediately went for a nightly walk around the city with the goal of teaching that insolent attacker of innocent people a lesson.

Due to the scandal of the continuous random killings, there were hardly any people on the streets. The person who very occasionally walked down the street could be a murderer willing to kill any other passer-by, or someone who had dared to go out and make an example of that criminal, or even someone who depending on the circumstances could become one or the other.

In any case, when two of these individuals met, before releasing a voice, they drew their swords. After experiencing that episode on several occasions, Shimanosuke began to forget why he had actually gone out to roam the city at such a time, and it was impossible for him to distinguish between the samurai who murdered passersby and the one who wanted to punish him.

However, since every time they crossed swords he always ended up with a perfect victory after delivering a bracing blow to his opponent, these nocturnal walks gradually became a habit he could not relinquish.

It was precisely at one of these moments that his fateful meeting with Naruse Daishiro took place.

That night, Shimanosuke prowled quietly in search of an opponent in the vicinity of the place where the *daimyo* mansions lined up, near the main entrance to the castle. The moonlight scattered and reflected faintly above the blossomless cherry trees that roiled over the mud walls of the corner mansions. Shimanosuke suddenly felt in the corner of his heart the faint nostalgia of a man who has left his homeland behind.

"Utter nonsense", he said to himself and forced a smile.

Suddenly, he heard the faint sound of the footsteps on the other side of the corner. It was a quiet sound of a sandal, but at the same time it was stepping firmly on the ground. All of Shimanosuke's senses were

heightened in an instant.

As he stood on guard after turning around the corner of the wall, his opponent stood before him just as he was about to do the same. He was a samurai of about thirty-five or thirty-six years of age, broad-shouldered and robustly built. His right hand rested on the hilt of the *katana* that hung from his hip.

If the two had crossed paths like mere passers-by, each would have continued on his way without further delay. Instead, they had grabbed the blade at the same time and stopped short, for both had sensed the ominous aura of a rival they could not let their guard down for a moment.

—Are you the murderer? — asked the rival samurai in a muffled voice.

Shimanosuke realized that his opponent's intention was to attack him, so he immediately jumped a few feet away and drew his weapon. Though it was obvious that he had guessed Shimanosuke's movements at the time, his opponent stood firm, not drawing, and glaring at him.

—You will not get away with this, — he calmly announced in a low voice, and then he drew his *katana*.

The two remained for some time, casting fierce glances and pointing swords at one another.

Shimanosuke's *katana* attempted to initiate three of his techniques — Isonami ("Waves on the Cliff"), Uekasumi ("The High Mist") and Tenmaki ("The Celestial Swirl") — but before he could perform them, his opponent read his intentions and there was nothing he could do.

"He's from the same school as me, the Shinto style. But who can this skilled swordsman be?"

Neither on his previous pilgrimage of nearly ten years to improve his sword technique, nor, of course, since he had arrived in Edo, had he ever encountered such an opponent.

Shimanosuke's impatience was gradually intensifying. He did not necessarily believe himself inferior in skill to his opponent. However, there was something about his opponent that prevented him from rushing him in a last desperate attack. As long as they stood facing one another with their blades unsheathed, he could still resist as an equal. But he felt that if their blades collide, although he might obviously be able to strike his opponent, the attack he would receive would undoubtedly be even more severe.

Guided by his honor and his spirit as a swordsman, Shimanosuke set out to break down that last obstacle. His blade and body merged into one as he prepared to leap over his opponent

—Wait! — shouted the rival samurai, who took a step back and lowered

the tip of his sword, — Wait... It is not worth facing such an expert of my own Shinto style and having both of us get hurt. Let's sheathe our blades. —I'm fine with that.

Relieved, Shimanosuke sheathed his *katana*. Sweat streamed down his back. Apparently his opponent was experiencing the same thing. He returned the sword to its sheath, pulled out a handkerchief he had kept in his chest and wiped the sweat from his forehead with it.

—It has been a long time since I have encountered such experienced and formidable foe, — he said, with a pleased smile on his lips.

—So did I. No one could resist being attacked indiscriminately by someone so skilled.

—Ah, no, I am not the passer-by killer. I'm the one who went out for a walk to teach that criminal a lesson.

—Well, so have I!

—Come on, what a coincidence! — they both laughed at the same time.

—Which master did you learn the teachings of the Shinto school from?

—I am a disciple of lord Noguchi Oribe of the Kaga fief.

Of all the masters he have had so far, Shimanosuke gave him the name of the one who was farthest away and could cause him the least discomfort.

—Lord Oribe? I have heard of him. I have been initiated by Mamiya Shozaemon. My name is Naruse Daishiro, of the fief of Suruga. I'm pleased to meet you.

—Ah! Mr. Daishiro... the one who cuts the stones? — Shimanosuke replied.

—It is a name that displeases me, but yes, that is what people call me, — explained Naruse.

Shimanosuke had heard many times about "Daishiro the stone cutter". He was a man about whom there were many rumors, recognized as an unparalleled expert in the Shino style.

"Indeed, for a rival of this caliber, Daishiro the Stone Cutter, I can be proud that I was able to stand up to him to the end."

—I'm Sasajima Shimanosuke, a *ronin* from Sendai.

—Don't you have a lord to serve? Well, what a waste, for someone of your skills.

It is not known if this turned his fate around, but shortly after this meeting, thanks to Daishiro's enthusiastic recommendation, Shimanosuke entered the service of the Suruga fief.

Daishiro finished his time in Edo and had to return to serve in Suruga province, so Shimanosuke left with him for Sunpu, where he was posted to the second group of mounted guards at the *daimyo's* castle.

He was deeply grateful for Daishiro's generosity and was in awe of his prodigious sword. At the same time, however, an irrepressible ambition began to burn like a glowing flame in the depths of his soul: he wished to defeat Daishiro.

Shimanosuke understood that to overcome this rival Shimanosuke had to outdo him in the top-secret technique of the Tenshin Shoden Katori Shinto school which Daishiro have mastered. The technique was known as the Ichi no Tachi ("Single Sword Strike") technique and was transmitted by the master to a single disciple. After reaching this conclusion, he suppressed all his own techniques and put his soul to training of the "one-stroke sword" technique.

The silhouette of Shimanosuke appeared among the lush trees of Sengen Shrine during the night, wielding his sword and looking into the darkness. He could be also seen during the dawn on the banks of the Abe River, where the piercing screams, coming from his mouth, reverberated. However, that intense practice had lasted three months and exhausted him extremely, did not bear fruit.

Shimanosuke felt clearly again that constant cloud of black eerie obstacles was cutting him off again. And as on every other occasion, in the midst of that black cloud hung the vision of a beautiful woman. This time the woman in question was Kinue, the wife of his benefactor Naruse Daishiro.

IV

Daishiro had a honest and kind character, but because he was too frugal with his words and gave impression of being too modest, he was not very successful among women during his young age. It could be said, therefore, that the fact that he managed to marry the uniquely beautiful Kinue was a totally unexpected stroke of luck.

At the time when Tadanaga, the lord of Suruga castle, was still the *daimyo* of Kai, Daishiro was in his service as a head of cavalry. The first time Tadanaga set foot in Kai, someone gave him a horse named Murakumo ("concentration of clouds") as an offering. It had been an old man named Shinozuka Juzaburo, who had been a vassal of the previous lord of Kai, Takeda Shingen, and lived just outside the castle.

At first glance it seemed to be a good horse, but it certainly gave the impression of being indomitable, so there was no one who volunteered to ride it. The impulsive Tadanaga, faced with this situation, immediately proclaimed that he was going to test the horse. Juzaburo looked up at Tadanaga's face and smiled a strange smile of joy, so slight that no one

noticed.

Once Tadanaga got onto the horse and went halfway across the courtyard, Juzaburo turned to him with a broad smile:

—Go ahead, young sir, try to ride faster, just once more.

After saying this, Juzaburo suddenly drew his short sword and stuck it into the horse's hindquarters.

The horse instantly reared up, stood on its hind legs and ran wildly. It galloped at full speed, as if possessed by a demon, towards the wall ahead. Tadanaga became pale. His desperate attempts to control the animal had no effect. If the horse had got any further, it would crash into the wall and Tadanaga would crack his skull.

—Look, everyone! Watch the last moments of Tadanaga! Look! — cried Juzaburo as he pointed at the horse and the man on it.

Tadanaga's vassals understood that this was clearly a retaliation planned by Takeda's former vassal against Tokugawa's descendants, but they had been petrified and did not know what to do.

When it seemed that the young feudal lord's life was about to be extinguished like a candle flame in the wind, Daishiro appeared riding, like a hurricane, on the back of a horse.

As he galloped past Juzaburo, who was shouting as he jumped for joy, from the top of the horse he unleashed a swift blow on his skull and knocked him down on the spot, then he began to chase Tadanaga's horse.

The distance was shrinking (fifty meters... twenty meters... ten meters) and it seemed that they were already advancing side by side, but the wall was only five meters away.

Daishiro jumped off his horse and threw himself between the wall and Tadanaga's horse with his sword drawn in his right hand, cutting off the animal's front legs with a clean cut that drew a horizontal line. The horse instantly snorted and collapsed forward.

It looked as if Tadanaga was going to shoot over the horse's head and hit the ground, but instead he sat heavily on the back of the animal lying on the ground.

After cutting off both of the horse's front legs, without wasting a minute, Daishiro leapt to the rear and severed the other two as well.

All the vassals watched the events unfold with their breath bated, but at this point they could not suppress a cry of surprise. Daishiro knelt before Tadanaga, his lips trembling and cold sweat pouring off, hiding the bloody blade behind his back.

—My lord, forgive me for my violent behavior in this emergency situation, — he excused himself respectfully with a bow.

On the same day Daishiro received an increase of one hundred *oku* in his stipend and was promoted to head of the guard. He had a magnificent reputation throughout the fief. The young girls who until then had ignored him completely now stretched out their necks to see him pass, followed him with their eyes and whispered to one another.

Such sudden popularity did not seem to have affected Daishiro much, but when the guard captain Watanabe Kenmotsu proposed that he accept his daughter Kinue in marriage, he blushed and was so ridiculously astonished that he could not speak. It was understandable, for Kinue was one of the most beautiful women in the fief.

However, one might doubt whether marrying such a beautiful woman was really a blessing for Daishiro. To safeguard his beautiful wife from the clutches of other men, Daishiro was forced on many occasions to stain his blade with blood. The incident that resulted in his being nicknamed Daishiro "the stone cutter" was one such incident.

Seven years ago, when she had only recently become Daishiro's wife, Kinue's innocent beauty had stolen the heart of a swordsman named Oe Jubee, an expert in the *Itto* style, and he was persistently harassing her. Oe was related to Kinue on her mother's side. She had been in the Kansai region for a long time, but she turned to Kinue's father, Watanabe Kenmotsu, for employment.

However, once he saw Kinue he was captivated and forgot about the job. He courted Kinue by all means, but the woman was still attached to her husband, who still had a great reputation as a swordsman, so she paid him no attention, rejected him outright and treated him with contempt. But the more she hated him, the more the man's obsession increased.

One night when Daishiro had gone out, Oe conspired with several thugs and abducted Kinue.

Daishiro learned of his wife's plight through an urgent warning from an infantryman, and returned with a vengeance, tracking Oe's band until he caught up with them in the compound of the famous Daisen temple on Mount Hane, east of the Fuji River.

When he saw his wife Kinue lying on the ground in the moonlight in a corner of the cemetery, her hands tied behind her back, her kimono skirts untidy and resisting with all her might, Daishiro became the fury personified.

—Bastards!

Like the swell of a raging sea, he threw himself at them with his precious sword forged by Higo no Kami Teruhiro. With a flash of it he caused a death and with another flash — another death. In the blink of an eye the

grass between the tombstones became bloodstained after every one of five people screamed in agony. But the leader of the evildoers, Oe Jubei, was already on the run.

—Shit! You're not getting away from me!

Daishiro ran after him, but he had no control over where he stepped. The blood that had spurted from the wounds of his victims got into his eyelid and he was unable to open his right eye.

Skillfully using the play of light and shadow woven into the tombstones, the undergrowth, and the moonlight, Daishiro followed Oe in his persistent attempt to escape, guided more by his will than his legs.

When it seemed that with one last effort the tip of the blade forged by Teruhiro would hit Oe's shoulder, he vanished. Though Daishiro saw everything as a blur, the only place anyone could hide was behind the three-foot stone that stood before his eyes. He pointed his *katana* at the stone and as two simultaneous roars echoed — the sound of Daishiro's voice and the metallic sound of his sword — he struck the stone. A groan was heard, and both the stone and Oe, who was hiding behind it, were pierced by the sword. Oe was cut from the shoulder to the abdomen and succumbed on the spot.

From then on he began to be nicknamed Daishiro "the stone cutter" because of his dazzling sword technique. But it was precisely the fact that he had such a reputation as a swordsman and was married to such a beautiful woman that was a constant source of concern to Daishiro in secret.

The first of his concerns was the uncertainty about the fidelity of his attractive wife. For about the first year of their marriage, she admired her husband's glowing reputation and loved him (or perhaps thought she loved him). After this first year, knowing her own beauty, she began to despise her scant husband. Accustomed as she was to the life of self-indulgence she led in her parents' wealthy house, she disliked more and more the scrupulously humble life she now led.

Surely the expert predators of women who swarmed everywhere did not overlook the change in Kinue's feelings. They would whisper pleasant flattery in her ear that hid poison and would excite her captivating body, which was becoming more and more exuberant.

If he truly saw with his own eyes the infidelity of his wife, however much he loved her, Daishiro would not hesitate to kill her. Yet he had no conclusive proof of her infidelity. There were only countless circumstances that made him doubt her.

No matter how many doubts there were, however, they were nothing more

than suspicions. If Kinue denied everything outright, there was nothing else to do. Sometimes Kinue ran out of excuses and justified herself by saying that she had firmly rejected him, but that the suitor was still persistently harassing her. As soon as she learned the names of such harassers, Daishiro sent them an official letter of challenge, and they all fled the same day they received it. On the other hand, there were others he killed in one fell swoop after planning his assassination.

V

The second of his concerns had to do with his reputation as a swordsman. Daishiro hated the nickname "the stone cutter" that he had been given. He himself was the first to be surprised when he saw that the stone on the tombstone had been split in two. It never crossed his mind that he could cut a stone in half, let alone actually carry it out.

After he had cut both the stone and the disgusting man, he was astonished at the greatness of his own blade. He found it difficult to believe that he had actually done it.

To convince himself, he secretly tried to cut the stones at the edge of the small pond in his garden after that incident at night. On the first occasion he failed: the blade of the sword broke in two and flew away. The second attempt also failed: the blade ended up bending. For the third test he wielded his precious Teruhiro sword, the one that had broken the stone, and struck the stone with all his might. But the blade was completely shattered and caused the stone nothing more than a white scratch.

"That time I was able to cut the stone by pure chance, my ability is not strong enough to split a stone", he was forced to admit.

But it was evident that when people pointed at him and shouted "*Daishiro the stone cutter!*", they thought of him as an expert swordsman capable of cutting a stone at any time.

"People are imposing something on me that I am not capable of doing", Daishiro thought, and that is why he disliked hearing about the incident with the stone or his nickname of "the stone cutter."

But people interpreted this as another sign of his modesty, so they looked up to him with even greater respect and admiration. In that case, Daishiro had only one path left to follow.

"On one occasion, even by chance, I managed to cut a stone tablet. If I train hard enough, there is nothing to stop me from being able to do it again at any time."

Daishiro again engaged in developing and practicing the technique of cutting the stones in the garden next to the pond. He even smashed ten swords: some cracked, some bent, and even some broke. However, the stones in the garden received hardly any scratches, and it seemed as if they were laughing at Daishiro, mocking his skill, lying ignorantly near the pond.

After spending several days in anguish and despair, Daishiro summoned up his courage and went to visit his former master Mamiya Shozaemon, who led a life of seclusion at the Suwa shrine in Shinano Province.

Daishiro swallowed his pride and confessed everything that had happened to him.

—If I was only able to cut a stone on that occasion, it was because the rage that came over me when I saw that my wife Kinue was about to be defiled gave me an inexplicable vigor that flowed through my sword of Teruhiro. Does that mean, then, that until I find myself in such a situation, my blade will not be able to show any real strength?

"Since I was a child I received the teachings of the master for twelve years, and then I was training on my own for another ten years, and seeing that this is all the technique I have managed to arrive at, thinking that I am not capable of cutting a stone satisfactorily, I feel a deep uneasiness and am sincerely displeased", Daishiro concluded and bowed his head.

As the tip of his white beard moved in the gentle breeze, Shozaemon listened and watched Daishiro intently with a serene gaze, but then said: —Cut... a stone? Well, that's too complicated. I do not know if I would be able to do it myself. I think I could, but if I don't try I'll never know. Anyway, Daishiro...

—Yes?

—Isn't it the same whether you can cut it or not?

—Huh?

—The sword isn't meant to cut the stone. The sword is meant to kill someone to protect oneself.

—Yes...

—Instead of trying uselessly to cut a stone, try to clear the doubts in your heart.

—Yes.

—Once you have cleared those doubts, you may even be able to break a stone in two unexpectedly. Ha ha ha! It's been a while since we've seen each other... Don't look so serious and have some sake.

His master's warm words touched him deeply.

"Instead of cutting a stone, put an end to the doubts in your heart. The sword is not meant to cut the stone."

Daishiro returned to Kofu, in the province of Kai, holding these teachings in his chest. He abandoned his obsession with cutting the stone and concentrated on continuing his learning of the way of the sword, while also immersing himself in the way of Zen at the hands of Mokuzen, the priest of the Buddhist temple Chozen.

However, the stones in the garden at the edge of the pond appeared to him in a dream at dawn with a kind of human face, and they smiled from ear to ear as if they were still mocking Daishiro's training.

"How are you doing? You can't cut me, can you?" the stones said.

When he woke up and went down to the garden, whether he wanted to or not, those stones caught his eye, and he also had the impression that they stood out from his field of vision ten times larger than the real one. No matter how hard Daishiro tried to ignore them and drive them out of his mind, he realized that his gaze always ended up on the stones, and he frowned in exasperation.

In the third year, Daishiro woke up one morning and stood for a while with his eyes wide and clear like those of a child, as if something was missing. This was because just before he woke up, in the last throes of sleep, those unbearable stones in the garden had made a sad face and disappeared completely. He rose to his feet, and as he went out into the garden the stones had shrunk in size and seemed quite insignificant.

"I can cut them down at any time", cried a voice clearly in the depths of Daishiro's heart, full of confidence. But Daishiro did not cut the stone. He was so convinced of his abilities that he felt no need to.

The following month Tadanaga was granted the fiefdom of Suruga, so most of the vassals who served at Kofu had to move to Suruga. Before moving, Daishiro went back to Suwa after so long to visit his old master. —How are things going? Are you still cutting stones? — Shozaemon asked with a laugh.

—No, I stopped trying to do it. But I have the impression that I could do it right now, — Daishiro answered, and proceeded to tell him about his training over the past three years.

After listening, Shozaemon said something unexpected:

—You did it, Daishiro! Now I am going to teach you the secret technique of the Shinto style, the "one sword stroke" technique, which was always passed on to a single disciple.

Daishiro was initiated into the mysteries of the greatest secret of the Shinto style and then moved to his new destination in Sunpu.

His anguish about the sword had already disappeared completely. He could now turn a blind eye to the name people called him, Daishiro the Stone Cutter.

However, he still could not shake off his other concern from the bottom of his heart: the suspicions about his wife Kinue, which still lingered on in this swordsman even though he tried to dispel them with the blows of his sword.

Even when he returned, accompanied by Sasajima Shimanosuke, after concluding his year-long tour of duty in Edo, he learned of two or three reprehensible rumors about his wife's behavior during his absence.

Obviously, when his wife was asked about it, he denied everything and since he had no definitive proof Daishiro was forced, as usual, to drown out all such doubts within his chest.

As he held Kinue in his arms again after a year without being able to do so, her soft, voluptuous skin, in her prime, was so fragrant that it confused him and made him lose his senses. Daishiro was neither willing nor able to say a single word that might incur the slightest displeasure from his beautiful wife.

Of course, Daishiro did not expect Sasajima Shimanosuke, whom he had recommended to serve in the fief and had accompanied him from Edo, to be attracted to Kinue. But that is what actually happened. Shimanosuke fell madly in love with Kinue as he always did: with a mad, burning, reckless passion.

VI

—Lord Naruse, please, could I face you?

—No.

Shimanosuke asked Daishiro for the umpteenth time.

—Didn't we already draw our steel swords to face each other in Edo?

There is no need to do so at this point, — Daishiro always replied.

—But on that occasion I could see clearly from your position that you had mastered the technique of "a single sword strike", the secret technique of the Shinto style. The ultimate desire of anyone who has wielded a sword and learned the Shinto style is to master that secret technique. Please, I would like to receive your teachings.

—The "single sword stroke" technique is a secret technique that is only passed on to the best of the disciples. I am not allowed to teach you that technique on my own.

—Are you suggesting that I don't have the skill yet? — Shimanosuke gritted his teeth to control himself.

Seeing his expression, Daishiro corrected himself:

—I am not saying that your skills are insufficient, it is more correct to say that it is a matter of the heart.

—Then you suggest that my heart is unprepared?

—No, it is not that it lacks preparation either. What seems to me is that there is an intense turmoil in your heart that at all times manifests itself in your eyes and in your whole body. If I am wrong, I ask your forgiveness. If Shimanosuke had to give his opinion, he would agree with Daishiro. However, naturally he could not say, "It is because I am in love with your wife Kinue".

—Once I've got rid of that confusion in my heart, will you instruct me in your "one sword strike" technique?

—As I have told you before, because of the strict rules of transmission of that knowledge, I cannot instruct you on my own in a secret technique without the authorization of my old master. However, if you train yourself to master the secrets of the "single sword stroke" technique, I offer my help to you in any way I can. That is to say, even if I could not formally instruct you, if only you would remove that indecision from your heart, I would provide you with some practical training.

—I could not ask for more than that.

But was it possible for him to get rid of the indecision and confusion in his heart?

"Yes, it would be possible, if I could only get Kinue for myself, if I could only get the body of the beautiful Kinue for myself once."

His illicit love for Kinue burned with high, red flames, as if a fire had been further fanned, and raised a blazing whirlwind.

Although Shimanosuke had full confidence in his power of attraction to women, Kinue was still, so to speak, the wife of his benefactor. And besides, of all the women he had fallen in love with thus far, she was by far the most beautiful. The unpleasant rumors about Kinue had not yet reached his ears, so Shimanosuke thought of this woman as a fortress who would not be easily conquered.

Squeezing the picaresque nature of those in love to the max, he devised a secret plan. One night when he knew that Daishiro would not be home because he had to take care of the night watch, he took advantage of Daishiro's absence to visit his mansion.

—Oh, Mr. Sasajima! Tonight my husband is on duty... — Kinue began to say after stepping out into the hall, but Shimanosuke interrupted her:

—Yes, I know. But, Kinue, there is something I want to talk to you about. Kinue stared at the man's face. She had no trouble getting a general idea of what he was up to. Many men were taking advantage of Daishiro's absence to come and see her, and they were all saying and doing the same thing. Kinue's attitude in such cases changed radically depending on whether or not the man in question was to her liking.

Obviously, Kinue liked Shimanosuke. Her husband talked about the swordsman incessantly, skyrocketing his sword technique. In addition, that spectacularly beautiful face that was her main feature had long since made Kinue's loving heart tingle pleasantly.

Shimanosuke, as usual, stared at the woman with his eyes slanting, with thick eyelashes, looking half-asleep; and as he felt Kinue being watched by those pupils, both his heart and his body began to go numb. A force that was difficult to resist, which impelled her to throw herself impetuously towards the man's chest, oppressed her heart. Shimanosuke sat across from Kinue and said in a feverish voice:

—Lady Kinue, I am going to open my belly before your eyes.

—What? — Kinue was stunned by his unexpected words and could not believe what she had just heard.

—I am a scoundrel, a despicable man, a bastard. I want to die... To apologize to lord Daishiro.

—Mr. Shimanosuke, what happened? I'm sorry. I don't understand what this is all about.

—Lady Kinue, it's something impossible for your pure and virtuous heart to understand. I... Even if I risk my life, I'm in love with you. Even though I know that you are the beloved wife of my benefactor, I was driven by an irrepressible force and ended up obsessing over you. Even I think I'm a pathetic man. I'm very sorry, both for you and for lord Daishiro. I will put an end to this illicit love myself. I simply thought that, as a final reminder of this life, I wanted to inform you of this in a few words, and then die before your eyes, and so I came here tonight.

Just by looking at his face, Kinue's heart had already succumbed completely to Shimanosuke, but after these honest words it was already absolutely impossible for her to resist.

—But what are you saying? Mr. Shimanosuke, please do not take your life. I've been thinking about you for a long time, too.

The exquisite and gratifying moment of holding the beloved woman in his arms was granted him with even greater ease than he had expected.

Shimanosuke plunged into the soft body of Kinue in ecstasy, leaving his

mind blank and letting his passion and desire flow to satisfaction, with emotions both rampant and cursed.

Before dawn, when it was still dark, Shimanosuke quietly stepped away from the woman who was still lying soundly asleep and exhausted, left the mansion, took a path to the south, and, passing by the side of the treasure chamber, began to climb up Mount Atago.

He purified her body with the water from the shrine well and when he reached a clearing of just over thirty-three square meters that opened up among the leafy trees on the side of the mountain, he quietly drew the sword from its sheath. That was the place where he used to go secretly to practice with his sword.

In the midst of an atmosphere so silent that there was not even a whisper of the breeze, breathing the mountain air, both the body and the spirit of Shimanosuke were completely serene and there was not the slightest trace of the sudden impatience he had experienced until the day before.

He concentrated mentally and then the glimmerings of his unsheathed blade shook the air and Shimanosuke's eyes shone like the morning star. A new, infinite world had just opened up before the tip of his blade.

An hour later, Shimanosuke put the sword away, wiped off his sweat, returned to the shrine, and when he reached the facade he bowed respectfully and took a deep breath.

"Shimanosuke has mastered, by himself, the most secret of the techniques of the Shinto style, the technique of 'a single sword strike'."

He had not even needed Daishiro's teachings.

He had managed to unravel the secrets of that technique by his own.

"Daishiro is no longer a fearsome adversary to me", Shimanosuke told himself as he strode down the mountain path. In his head there was no longer a hint of the mirage of Kinue's precious body, which he had coveted with such vehemence until just a few hours ago.

VII

There was someone who saw Shimanosuke leave Daishiro's mansion before dawn: the neighbor next door, a man named Yasumura Shingo. He, too, had made proposals to Kinue and had been turned down forcefully. He was a withered man whose eyes reminded of a mouse.

Those mouse eyes glowed with envy when he whispered to Daishiro:

—I assure you I'm not making this up.

After confirming it in a voice of sorrow, Daishiro headed immediately for Shimanosuke's residence.

—A certain person saw you leave my mansion this morning before dawn. Shimanosuke was surprised that he had been discovered so soon. Since someone had seen him, there was no point in denying it.

—Yes, I have visited your mansion.

—What for?

—I woke up in the middle of the night and came up with a sword technique. I could not help myself and went to your home to receive your teachings. But when I had reached the inner garden of your mansion, I remembered that you were on night duty that night, so I returned to my home.

While this seemed an unnatural justification, it was not altogether unthinkable coming from a sword enthusiast.

—And Kinue... — Daishiro began to say in a pained voice, as if something were choking him, — You wouldn't have gone to see Kinue, would you?

—Why would I have to go to see lady Kinue? — Shimanosuke countered.

—According to the person who saw you, you supposedly... Did something wicked to Kinue.

—Who is this insolent person who is slandering me in such a way?

—You don't have to know that. So you really didn't see Kinue?

—Let us both go see lady Kinue.

Shimanosuke took the lead and headed for Daishiro's residence.

When she saw her beloved, the man with whom she had entwined her naked body tightly from midnight the day before until before dawn, appear in the company of her husband, the woman was disconcerted and her cheeks blushed due first to embarrassment, and then to joy.

Yet both the expression on Shimanosuke's face and his voice when he addressed her were so empty and cold that he did not seem like the same person.

—Lady Kinue, it seems there is someone who says that I came to visit you last night and left this mansion at dawn. I have come to see you to defend my innocence. Please say clearly in front of your husband Daishiro that I have not seen you even once without the presence of your lord husband.

—It is just as he says.

—I only see lady Kinue as the wife of my respected benefactor. I have never harboured any other feeling than that, nor could I. Lord Daishiro, if I have not yet dispelled your fears, I swear that I will not set foot in this residence again, even when you are present.

The tone of Shimanosuke's voice was calm and determined, like that of someone with a clear conscience.

—I am sorry I have doubted you, — Daishiro apologized and bowed his head.

The next day, Shimanosuke had just left the castle when, halfway through, Kinue called out to him from a hiding place and made him stop.

—Shimanosuke, what you said yesterday, that you wouldn't set foot in my house again, you surely wouldn't mean it...

She hinted at it with a flirtatious tone and a smile that said, "You're such a good actor!".

—Lady Kinue, it's just as I said yesterday.

—Huh?

—To begin with, I won't be coming to your house again, and we must also refrain from talking like this in secret.

—Shimanosuke, but if you...

—You should think that last night was just a dream.

Kinue stared blankly at the face of the man who spoke so casually.

—Shimanosuke, when you told me you wanted me so badly, was it all a lie?

—It wasn't a lie. It was true at the time, but now all the love I had for you is gone. I know it seems strange, but there's nothing you can do about it.

—You bastard!

Kinue went mad with rage and humiliation. This was the first time she had experienced something like this. Until now, all the men were mad about the love they offered her or the embers of their sexual desires, they worshipped her and held onto her stubbornly until the last moment. Even those who feared Daishiro's sword and fled to distant lands later, in one way or another, brought their heartfelt love to her. It was always she who, at the right moment, declared the break-up of the relationship, yet this was the first time that it was a man, and moreover immediately after the first meeting, who dismissed her so coldly.

Kinue was a woman with an unbreakable spirit and a strong character, so her anger was also vehement and irrepressible: "I'm not going to let that Shimanosuke stay alive... I want to kill him... I want to strangle him and spit in his face".

Kinue decided to take drastic measures. That night she went to Daishiro and asked him:

—Please kill Sasajima Shimanosuke.

—What's that about at this point? — Daishiro was surprised by his wife's sudden burst of anger.

—I'll be honest with you. Shimanosuke abused me.

—What?! — Daishiro instantly stood up.

—Everything Shimanosuke said was a lie. That man had been proposing to me for a long time. He waited until the night you were on duty and snuck into the house. He forced me and did with me what he wanted. I resisted him as long as I could, but I could do nothing in the face of this man's strength.

—Kinue! Is that true?

—It's the truth. Please kill that disgusting brute. After that I'm ready to receive my due punishment. But I can't die peacefully without seeing that man die with my own eyes.

—Kinue, why didn't you tell the truth last time?

—That man was lying so brazenly and so imperturbably that I was stunned and could not get the words out. That man is a demon. I find it so humiliating to be raped by a guy like him...

As he watched his wife squirm in agony and her night clothes unravel, Daishiro's expression took on a chilling tone.

—Kinue, bring me the bar of Indian ink and the stone to rub on.

When he had finished writing the letter of challenge in characters that throbbed with rage, he placed the seal on the left (as was customary in this type of letter) and commissioned a servant to deliver it to Shimanosuke.

—Tomorrow I'll kill him. And then I'll think about what I'm going to do with you.

But the answer to his challenge, which he assumed would be instantaneous, did not come.

"Has the bastard ran away?"

When Daishiro approached Shimanosuke's residence the next morning, he was informed that he had already left. He managed to hunt him down inside the castle.

—Sasajima, it's not worth arguing about. You saw my letter of challenge. Why have you not sent me a reply?

—I can't fight a duel over something I'm innocent of.

—You still have the nerve to insist on your innocence? Coward! And now? You still say you can't duel me?

Daishiro slapped Shimanosuke.

—Oh!

Shimanosuke put his hand to his cheek, took a step back and gave Daishiro a murderous look; prominent blue lines were marked on his pale forehead. Any self-respecting samurai, if called a coward and beaten in the face, cannot refuse a duel.

—Naruse, this time it is I who challenge you to a duel.

—Tonight, at eight o'clock, come to the shrine of Hachiman.

—No, I've received a public insult inside the castle, so we'll duel in a public place.

—What?

—You should come with me to see the Honourable Adviser to the great lord.

After cleverly transforming the reality of a duel caused by the rape of a married woman into a duel for an arbitrary insult, Shimanosuke appeared accompanied by Daishiro before advisor Saegusa Izunokami.

—Honorable advisor, there is something I would like to ask of you.

Because of my inescapable devotion to the martial arts, I would like to duel Naruse Daishiro.

—You... Against Naruse? — Saegusa found such a proposal incomprehensible, as he knew it was Daishiro who had enthusiastically recommended Shimanosuke.

—That is correct, and in that respect I believe that the best option would be to face Daishiro with real swords in the next duel-to-the-death tournament in the presence of our lord, which will take place on September twenty-fourth. Since both Daishiro and I have mastered the secrets of the Shinto style I think it will be an interesting duel, whomever wins, — Shimanosuke explained calmly and quietly, as if he were speaking on a matter that did not concern him.

—Naruse, do you agree? — Daishiro answered affirmatively, — I see... I do not quite understand, but if you both agree and wish to do so, there is nothing to be done. At any rate, I will discuss it with my lord.

To Tadanaga, the lives of his vassals were no more valuable than that of a worm. As soon as he was told it would be an interesting duel, he agreed immediately:

—Let them kill each other.

After obtaining the permission of the feudal lord, this match was included in the program of the duel-to-the-death tournament.

When this was announced to Shimanosuke, he went back to Saegusa:

—Honorable advisor, I have one more favor to ask of you.

—What is it?

—Naruse is known as Daishiro the Stone Cutter, but I have yet to see his secret stone-cutting technique. If I'm lucky, I intend to win the fight, but there's also a chance that I'll be defeated and lose my life, in which case I'd like to see him cut a stone before I die. There was much talk about Daishiro's ability to cut the stone, but no one had actually seen him do it.

—Daishiro, what do you think? Will you try cutting a stone in half with your sword?

—I will, — Daishiro said sharply.

VIII

The day before the duel, a remarkable incident occurred. An eighteen year old girl named Yoshizawa Matsu visited the official mansion of Sakaki Hanbei, inspector of Suruga fief, carrying an official license of revenge from Yonezawa fief.

—I want to avenge my older sister's death, and to do so I would like to duel with Sasajima Shimanosuke, — Matsu requested.

The woman had been accompanied by a muscular samurai in his thirties named Muraki Ihei, who would play her assistant in the duel. Sakaki Hanbei summoned Shimanosuke.

—Matsu, the daughter of Yoshizawa Ryutaro, vassal of the fief of Yonezawa, has requested to duel with you to avenge the death of her older sister. Do you know her?

—Yes.

Matsu's older sister... Was a black-eyed girl with a crease in her eyelids, resembling a white evening primrose that would have bloomed alone in the shade of the trees.

Some time ago Shimanosuke fell madly in love with her and, after achieving his wishes, abandoned her. It was then that he managed to master the secrets of the Isonami technique ("waves on the cliff"). He later learned that she had died and left a suicide note. Her father was an old man in his seventies, and his successor was his grandson Mitsuyoshi, a helpless boy, so the turn have came to Matsu, his younger sister, to avenge her sister's death.

—Although I am completely surprised that they would want to take revenge on me for circumstances beyond my control, if they so wish, I am willing to confront them at any time.

—She is accompanied by an assistant named Muraki Ihei.

—He is an expert in the *Chujo* style. I have heard that he is her cousin. For my part, I don't mind confronting the two of them.

Upon being informed by Sakaki, Advisor Saegusa Izunokami was perplexed. Since the girl had presented herself carrying an official revenge license issued by the Yonezawa fief, they could not refuse her request.

However, in the event that Shimanosuke died in the duel, then the feudal lord would no longer be able to enjoy the decisive match between Shimanosuke and Daishiro that he had already told her about.

—I won't be killed by someone like Muraki. I will duel today and finish off Matsu too, thus preventing her from getting her revenge, — Shimanosuke declared casually.

However, while Matsu would not be a problem, the *Chujo* style swordsman, Muraki, could not be defeated so easily since the man certainly knew Shimanosuke's skill and would still have agreed to assist in the duel.

After lengthy deliberations between Saegusa and Sakaki, Matsu was told: —Although your request for revenge has been accepted, as tomorrow's duel was already decided, your revenge will have to wait until the end of that match.

—I heard that the duel will be fought with real swords. If Sasajima were to die in that fight, our suffering of all these years would come to nothing. Please allow me to exact my revenge before the duel.

Matsu and Muraki begged desperately but Saegusa, whose greatest fear was to anger Tadanaga, did not give in.

That same night, Matsu and Muraki Ihei raided Shimanosuke's dormitory. In preparation for their duel the next day, Shimanosuke had gone to bed early. Although his intention was to sleep soundly and peacefully, the conversation he had had during the day with Saegusa and Sakaki about Matsu suddenly came to mind. And this brought back a whole series of memories. Then, one after another, the faces of all the women he had sacrificed in the name of his own apprenticeship as a swordsman appeared to him.

Until now he had never once remembered those women he had abandoned. "This cannot be. It will disturb my mental serenity and prevent me from sleeping."

He tried to make the images of those women disappear, but their faces kept turning inside their eyelids, like a pinwheel, with a disturbing insistence. Irritated, he decided to get up to calm down, but when he opened one of the sliding doors, he found Matsu and Muraki waiting for him in the garden.

The door opened unexpectedly just as they were about to sneak into the house, so at first the two had been a bit disconcerted, but then they identified themselves, pulled out swords and approached him.

Shimanosuke quickly retreated and returned to his chambers.

His two opponents followed, but by the time they had broken through, Shimanosuke was already waiting for them in the center of the room with his short sword drawn in his hand. Shimanosuke turned to Muraki, who was in the corridor overlooking the garden, and shouted at him in a shrill voice:

—Muraki, the lintels will be a hindrance to your long sword.

The instant Muraki, puzzled, turned his gaze upward momentarily, Shimanosuke threw his body forward and plunged his short sword into his chest.

He snatched the dagger from Matsu before Muraki's body collapsed back onto the floor of the corridor.

He twisted her arm and forced her to the ground.

"She looks like her... She'd be the spitting image of her sister... If that unshakable expression in her eyes disappeared."

Shimanosuke laid Matsu down on the bed without a word and she took on the appearance of a wild beast, as she groaned in outrage and continued to resist.

A half hour later, Shimanosuke removed his body from her, lifted Matsu's torso in his arms, and made her wield her dagger.

—Matsu, get up. Let us fight.

Matsu stood up with an expression of indescribable pathos on his face and tucked the skirts of her brutally dislodged kimono into place as he staggered.

—You are a brute! — she moaned with dry lips and lunged at him. But Shimanosuke knocked her down with a single diagonal cut from the shoulder. After which, he fell into a deep sleep until shortly before dawn in that bedroom steeped in the stench of fresh blood.

The next morning he woke up and purified his body with the cold water from the well in the garden. Then he woke up the young servant, who was sleeping like a log and had not heard anything, and made him dispose of the bodies. Finally, he made his way quietly to the castle, feeling as good as new.

IX

It was four o'clock in the afternoon on the twenty-fourth of September of the sixth year of the Kan'ei era (1629). In the bloody and brutal tournament of duels to the death before the feudal lord that took place inside the Sunpu Castle, which overwhelmed an entire generation, nine clashes had already

ended, and eleven of the fighters and three women among the spectators had already lost their lives.

At that hour the opponents of the tenth duel were announced: on the east side, Naruse Daishiro, and on the west side, Sasajima Shimanosuke.

However, the two swordsmen who had been summoned did not begin to fight immediately. As previously agreed, Naruse Daishiro was to demonstrate his secret stone-cutting technique before the duel.

A stone tablet a little over three feet high and about three inches thick had been installed in the center of the fighting enclosure, in front of which Daishiro was wielding his sword drawn.

Was he really going to split the stone in two? The hundreds of looks from around the room were filled with unusual interest and focused on the blade of the sword held by Daishiro.

Everyone knew about the incident with the stone cut by Daishiro.

Since he had been nicknamed Daishiro "the stone cutter", it was assumed that he was capable of cutting stones. But there were many people who reserved their doubts until they saw it with their own eyes, and they had long hoped that Daishiro would be willing to show them how he cut a stone.

Since he had cut that stone, Daishiro had not managed to cut any more stones. All his attempts had ended in failure and, on the advice of his master, he had discontinued the practice of cutting stones. However, since the sight of the stones had disappeared from his mind and he had been initiated into the secrets of the technique of "a single sword stroke", he was convinced that he could cut them.

And now that he was facing the stone in the presence of many people, including the feudal lord, he had not lost

not one iota of that conviction. Daishiro first raised his sword above his head with both hands and stared at the stone, but gradually brought it down until he changed to a position with his sword lowered. In this manner, aiming at the base of the stone, he stood as if frozen.

—Oh, what's wrong with him?

—Is it that he has realized that he cannot cut it?

As the Daishiro's supporters instinctively began to clench their fists, suddenly his sword rose quickly and vertically to the right shoulder, and then, fleetingly as a flash, he flew diagonally down from that position to the left side and stood still.

After a few moments, Daishiro silently held his blade close to his eyes and after examining the blade he smiled.

He then lightly struck the top of the stone with the hilt of his blade.

The upper left side of the stone fell off in an equilateral triangle and fell to the ground.

Amidst the shouts of admiration that came in unison, the only one who scrutinized Daishiro's movements with indifference was Shimanosuke.

"I can cut it off as well", a voice in his heart assured him.

The split stone was removed and at last the two swordsmen stood face to face to fight to the death.

Before crossing the swords, all the swordsmen make careful estimates, such as what is most advantageous for oneself, or what is the weak point of one's opponent.

Shimanosuke confirmed that, after killing Muraki and raping and murdering Matsu the night before, both his spirit and his body were in a very distant and high place. The wife of his rival Daishiro had been raped, so he surmised that he would be distressed, hurt, and outraged, and would naturally be outraged mentally and physically.

Furthermore, he presumed that his rival, after his stone-cutting blow, had already exhausted the energy needed to finish off several human beings. He could therefore conclude that in all respects the circumstances were favourable to him.

On the other hand, Daishiro had decided that, after defeating Shimanosuke, he would kill his wife Kinue. Since their marriage, he had devoted himself with all his soul to love his wife, and for that very reason he had suffered a hell of a jealousy, but he felt that after knowing for certain that Kinue had been sullied by Shimanosuke, he had no choice but to execute the assailant and then kill her. It was more painful for him to take the life of his wife than to take it himself.

The thought of his wife's death was enough to make him lose all hope or desire to live.

The one thought that spurred his fighting spirit limitlessly, above life and death, was the desire to end the detestable Shimanosuke by using the "single sword strike" technique he had mastered to the fullest. Having succeeded in cutting the stone had given him even more confidence. After he had cut the stone, he involuntarily smiled at himself because he was thinking that he would cut Shimanosuke in the same way that he had split the stone in two.

Also, he did not know if it was true that Shimanosuke could have mastered the "single sword strike" technique on his own. He was firmly convinced that, in terms of technical skill with the blade, he was superior to his opponent, and so each of these two swordsmen, whose lives had been equally — though for entirely different reasons — dominated by way of

the sword and women, judged his to be the more advantageous position as he faced his opponent with the determination to kill him.

The two swords moved almost imperceptibly, and as soon as the tips of both touched lightly, they instantly stopped. The evening was approaching, and the fighting arena was so quiet that it was hard to believe there were so many spectators in it. The atmosphere seemed to condense only over the tips of those two blades.

Within the technique of "a single sword strike" there are no movements to defend against an attack, repel the opponent's sword or counterattack. As the name suggests, if you tear the air with a single sword strike, the life of your opponent must be torn apart in the midst of that air.

That sword-strike must take the life of the opponent as rigorously and accurately as possible, and right now both opponents were about to make that sword-strike collide from the east and west.

The tension reached its peak, and a groan escaped someone in a corner of the hall. Just then a cry emanated from the mouths of both swordsmen in unison, similar to the sound produced when one rubs metal when polishing it, and tore the atmosphere.

Both had simultaneously directed their sword strike toward the opponent. On the spot, a gush of blood erupted from Daishiro's frowned face and flew out about two feet horizontally; and as it flew, an enigmatic triumphant smile spread across his face. Even once he hit the ground, the smile remained on his lips covered with fresh blood.

As he looked at that eccentric expression, a smirk of contentment appeared on Shimanosuke's beautiful face. Suddenly, however, that smile was violently deformed and the blade fell from his hand, as he felt intense, unbearable pain from his right shoulder to his chest.

When Shimanosuke raised his left hand to his shoulder, his upper body fell heavily to the ground, just as the stone split in two.

For a few moments the blood continued to spurt from the amputated lower part of the body, which had remained standing.

MUZAN BOKUDENRYU

(«The horrible style of Bokuden»)

EVENTS OF KASHIMA

I

The Kashima shrine was located on mount Kashima, in the Kashima district of province Hitachi, and was dedicated to the god of martial arts, Takemikazuchi.

Both the Kashima shrine and the Katori shrine in Shimosa province, which was dedicated to the god Futsunushi (another martial deity), were widely known as a Shinto shrine complex that was unparalleled in all of Japan. In the spring of the sixth year of the Kan'ei era (1629), curtains with red and white stripes were stretched out in one corner of the Kashima shrine compound, and in the vicinity of the *dojo* one could see a ceaseless coming and going of stout swordsmen with flashing eyes. These were the preparations for the first day of the monkey in the second month, according to the old lunar calendar; that is, the day of the Kasuga festival, which was to be held the following day.

It may seem somewhat inappropriate to establish a fencing *dojo* within the enclosure of a shrine and have it become a meeting place for swordsmen, but in the case of this particular shrine, it was the most appropriate. The reason for this is that the cradle of the seven ancient fencing schools in the Kanto region, as well as the eight Kyoto schools on mount Kurama is none other than the Kashima shrine, and the founders of modern Japanese fencing were, so to speak, the monks of that temple devoted to the god of martial arts. Especially Bokuden Tsukahara Shin'emon Takamoto, the famous swordsman who overwhelmed an entire generation from the Eisho era (1504-1521) to the Taiei era (1521-1528), second son of the shrine priest (Urabe Akikata), who was a student of Iizasa Chuisai and later revived the Shinto style and is acclaimed as a sword saint.

More than fifty years had already passed since Bokuden's death, but the *dojo* founded in the shrine grounds still underwent intensive training and every year, at the Kasuga festival in February, Shinto-style swordsmen arrived from all over the Kanto region and a great open-air dueling tournament was held.

One samurai came out of the *dojo*, sweating profusely, apparently from the

effort of training. He sat down on a stone in the garden and asked two other men who had been sitting there before, looking at the curtains surrounding the outdoor dueling arena:

—What do you think? Who will take the final victory this year?

—The logical thing would be that, like last year, in the end there would only be Kouda Shido and Iizasa Shurinosuke left. But if we are talking about a surprise, then perhaps Urabe Haruhide or Mizutani Yatsuya will win. It has to be one of those four, if anything.

—No way. The main favorites for victory are Kashiwabara Morishige or Hinatsu Shigeyoshi.

—Umm... Indeed, everyone seems to think so. Last year, in the final duel between Kouda and Iizasa, the latter barely won, but this year those two rookies are very popular, huh?

—Lord Urabe's son, Shintaro Haruhide, is traveling around the country to improve his technique and it appears he has already defeated Arima Yasunobu of Kii Province, Fukasu Satsumanokami of Kozuke, Matsubayashi Chuzaemon of Sendai, and Sekiguchi Yosuke of Edo.

—I heard he's still young...

—That's right, he must be about twenty-six or twenty-seven...

—And isn't this Mizutani guy even younger?

—Some people say it's not that bad. Besides, this year's tournament is different from previous ones. The two veterans, Kouda and Iizasa, will be doing their best. They will not easily let these youngsters make a name for themselves.

While the men were commenting on these things, several people appeared from the other side of the curtains, talking in a very loud voice.

—Come on! Isn't that Hijiko Doronosuke?

He was an old swordsman in his sixties, and he had an air of solemnity about him, even though he did not show the refinement of a city dweller.

When Morooka Ippa — the founder of the Ippa school, derived from the Shinto style — retired in his final years because he was suffering from leprosy, his disciples Iwama Oguma and the aforementioned Hijiko Doronosuke accompanied him and stayed by his side until the end.

However, a third disciple, Nejiki Tokaku, ran away and left his sick master. It was a widely discussed story that the other two disciples drew lots to see who would take revenge on Tokaku. It was Oguma's turn, who went to Edo, fought Tokaku on the bridge in front of the main entrance to Edo Castle and defeated his opponent by dropping him into the river. However, Oguma was later killed by a disciple of Tokaku, and it fell to Hijiko Doronosuke to spread the Ippa style.

Doronosuke had been invited as one of the referees to this great tournament for several years, but this time the expectation created around his attendance was due to the fact that it had been announced in advance that he would be accompanied by his precious disciple, Mizutani Yatsuya, who had been selected to participate in the tournament.

—And the one behind him will be this Mizutani, right?

—Mmm... Certainly, although he seems to be a gentle and delicate looking man, he never lets his guard down, either with his eyes or his body posture.

Doronosuke and Yatsuya, who have attracted the curiosity of all present, passed by the *dojo* and headed for Urabe Haruie's abode in the shrine.

Haruie had heard that Hijiko had already arrived and had gone out to meet him at the door of the hall. It was an old man in his eighties with silver hair and beard who addressed newcomers with a smile on his lips:

—Well, Mr. Hijiko! Thank you for taking the trouble.

However, his pupils were fixed on Mizutani Yatsuya.

Haruie was Bokuden's nephew. Bokuden's successor was his adopted son Tsukahara Hikoshiro Motohide, but he died in combat in the nineteenth year of the Tensho era (1591), and Bokuden's adopted son (Akichika) had also died years ago, so it fell to the latter's daughter, Ayume, to carry on the family legacy. As his last task, the old man Urabe was asked to find a suitor for Ayume to become the successor to the Bokuden family and to inherit the secrets of the Bokuden style sword technique.

After taking a seat on the floor, Doronosuke introduced him to his disciple Yatsuya.

—It seems that many more people have gathered this time than in previous years.

—This year, also counting the usual proposal of the great advisor of Suruga, enthusiasm of the swordsmen will also be considerably different from other years.

—In these times, when the post of shogunate instructor is monopolized by the Yagyu and Ono families, if we miss this opportunity, it will not be easy to bring the Shinto style back to the times of prosperity it enjoyed with master Bokuden. It is necessary to choose someone, whoever it is, who can be a good representative of the true Shinto style.

—You are absolutely right. It has been a little over fifty years since the passing of lord Bokuden, and the Shinto style is not even a shadow of what it was in the past. There was that Matsuoka Hyogonosuke who was initiated into the secrets of the "one stroke" technique, but the guy can't

think of anything else but being a *hatamoto* with a tiny stipend of one hundred and twenty *koku*, and bowing down to the Shinkage style of Yagyu and the *Itto* style of Ono. It is unfortunate. Even Sadayu, the son of Matsuoka, is a pushover who does nothing but fall short.

Mysteriously, many of Bokuden's disciples met a tragic end. The five most prominent disciples who had been initiated into the techniques of the secret scroll were Kitabatake Tomonori, Makabe An'yaken Domu, Saito Denki, Morooka Ippa, and Matsuoka Hyogonosuke. Kitabatake Tomonori was betrayed by a subordinate and died on the battlefield. Morooka Ippa died after suffering the agony of an incurable disease. Saito Denki was attacked by surprise by his own companion Makabe Domu, who brutally murdered him, the latter died later in battle. The only one who managed to make a better and more peaceful living was Matsuoka Hyogonosuke, who ingratiated himself with Tokugawa Ieyasu and managed to get him to name him his *hatamoto*.

But obviously that is not the only reason why, of the three competing schools that divided the swordsmen of the entire country into three camps — the *Shinto* style, the *Shinkage* style and the *Itto* style — the *Shinto* school became outdated.

Both the *Shinkage* and the *Itto* schools modernized the methods used by their instructors, systematized the technique of the spectacular offensive sword, divided learning into several levels, and devised ingenious methods to stimulate beginners. While the *Shinto* school continued to insist on its traditional shrine fencing, in which the way to self-learning was prioritized only through the discipline of one's own willpower and intense training, this meant that as times became peaceful, young people turned their backs on this style.

—Styles like *Shinkage* are unfeasible. In real combat they are useless, — the purists of the *Shinto* style used to say. Instead of using the bamboo swords with sheathes, characteristic of the *Shinkage* style, they stubbornly defended training with wooden swords. In the *Itto* style, learning (from wielding a short sword until you get your instructor's license) has been divided into up to eight levels, so it was like a child's play: you just have to learn one essential point at a time.

This way, by staying true to the old style, beginners felt that their progress was not recognized and they began to feel unsatisfied, so they ended up going to other schools.

The opportunity that now presented itself to a declining *Shinto* style was the following: Tadanaga, the younger brother of the *shogun* Iemitsu and a great chancellor of Suruga, had publicly announced that he would gather

swordsmen from all schools and from them choose the one who would be the official instructor. If the representative of the Shinto style was selected, it would become the official style of the Suruga fiefdom.

Furthermore, if it were to happen that, as a part of the society secretly hoped, Tadanaga would replace Iemitsu and become the *shogun*, then the *Shinkage* and *Itto* styles could indeed be brought down from their throne. The swordsmen who followed the teachings of the Shinto school had higher hopes than usual for this great tournament, for whoever was victorious would be recommended to the house of the great counselor of Suruga as an official candidate.

The information is often generalized this way when speaking of the Shinto style, but in reality at that time the school was divided into several factions. Iizasa Shurinosuke Morinaga, a direct descendant of the founder of this Iizasa Choisai's style, propagated it under his old name: *Tenshin Shoden Shinto*. The style of Arima Yamatonokami — who followed the teachings of Choisai's disciple, Matsumoto Hizennokami Masanobu — was known as *Arima* style, and that style of another disciple of Masanobu was called *Katori Shinto* style.

The style that was passed on from generation to generation from father to son, from Choisai to Tsukahara Tosanokami until it reached the adopted son of the latter, Bokuden, after the death of the latter it was called *Bokuden* style, and the disciples of the latter founded their own schools: Morooka Ippa — *Ippa* style, and Saito Denki — *Ten* style.

In the great tournament of Kashima of that year, representatives of all factions of the Shinto school counted as follows:

Tenshin Shoden Shinto style: Iizasa Shurinosuke Morinaga (37 years old)

Arima style: Kashiwabara Shinobee Morishige (32 years old)

Katori Shinto style: Kouda Rokuzaemon Shido (33 years old)

Ippa style: Mizutani Yatsuya Mitsunobu (25 years old)

Bokuden style: Urabe Shintaro Haruhide (26 years old)

Ten style: Hinatsu Kizaemon Shigeyoshi (28 years old)

Would any of these six be able to claim victory?

Speculation was growing intensely in anticipation of the big tournament happening the next day.

II

—Ayume, Ayume! — who called her that in an innocent and cheerful voice was Kayo, Urabe Haruie's granddaughter.

—Kayo, what happened? You've got a happy face...

Hearing her call, Ayume stopped at the edge of the spring and turned to look at Kayo's face, who was running towards her.

Ayume's elegant and refined figure suggested that of a lone daffodil that had blossomed on that shore. Her earlobes received the rays of the early spring sun, and in them, more captivating than the petals of a flower, the blood was slightly transparent, the black hair that fell on them as if to hide them gave a slight impression of heaviness.

In her beautiful features, which had the freshness of a flower that had just opened, there was the hint of something like a shadow, due to the fact that, being very young, she had to be separated from her parents and was left in charge of her relatives.

—Ayume, I have just seen Mizutani Yatsuya.

—Mizutani? Ah! I suppose you mean Hijiko's precious disciple.

—That's right. He's a splendid gentleman. You'd think he'd come out of a painting: he's young, handsome, dashing...

—Oh, really? But Kayo, didn't you say the same thing to me yesterday, after seeing Hinatsu Shigeyoshi?

—Wow! Did I tell you the same thing? Heh-heh-heh! But, seriously, Mizutani is really cute. He's talking to my grandfather in the living room right now. Ayume, why don't you go take a look at him?

—Oh, no! That would be very rude of me. Changing the subject, I wonder if Shintaro hasn't returned by now.

He had said that he intended to visit the tomb of Bokuden, the founder of the school in Tsukaharamura before the tournament, and had left early in the morning.

—Miss Ayume, you really like my uncle Shintaro, don't you?

—Oh... You know everything! — Suddenly her cheeks blushed.

—It must be hard for you...

—What exactly?

—Well, my uncles Shintaro, Kouda and Shurinosuke are all crazy about you.

—That's not true! But Kouda and the other one will soon be forty.

—Kouda probably still hopes to marry you, that's why he's single. Last year, when he was the winner of the tournament, he made my grandfather a proposal to marry you, and when he got refused because of the age

difference, they said he was so depressed that he lost about seven and a half kilos. Presumably he hasn't given up yet. The day before yesterday, when he came and saw your face, the expression on his face was quite poetic...

—Kayo, stop that.

—Well, if you don't like me talking about old people, I'll talk about young people. Hinatsu saw you for the first time yesterday, but it seems he's already... Heh-heh-heh! This morning he kept asking me enthusiastically about Ayume.

—Please don't tell him anything.

—I won't tell him anything, I know, I won't say a word about Shintaro. You can relax.

This somewhat precocious and talkative girl was beyond Ayume's control. She forced a smile and squatted at the water's edge.

—Look at the tents! — she exclaimed in an attempt to deflect the conversation, but apparently Kayo was much more interested in the love affair than the tents.

—Hey, Ayume... Later on, I'm sure Grandpa will introduce you to Mizutani. And then I'm sure Mizutani will fall in love with you too.

—What a thing to say! How can he fall in love with a person he's just met...

—But it's true! All the men who know you end up becoming a little strange... That's even a little annoying.

This was totally true. It wasn't just because she was beautiful. There was something in Ayume's eyes that enigmatically fascinated men. Besides, it seemed as if it was something that the daughters of the Tsukahara family had traditionally inherited from generation to generation.

The Tsukahara were an ancient family that had been *daimyo* of Tsukaharamura (Kashima district) for generations under the name Tosanokami, but curiously in that family not a single male child grew up. Even if a child were born, they all died at a very young age. Instead, extraordinarily beautiful girls were given to them.

The family line was preserved through the selection and adoption of one of the many young men who fell in love with those beautiful daughters. Bokuden was actually born into the Urabe family, but he fell in love with Tae, the daughter of Tsukahara Tosanokami Yasumoto, competed fiercely against his older brother Yasutaka for her, eventually winning and entering the family by becoming Tae's husband. Bokuden did not have any children either. He had only one beautiful child, Chiyo. Bokuden's adopted son, Hikoshiro Motohide, was a disciple who defeated two other courtiers and

finally got Chiyo. Likewise, Sae, Motohide's only daughter, chose Akichika from all the young men who were in love with her and made him her husband. Ayume was the only daughter of Akichika and Sae. It had not yet been decided who Ayume's husband would be.

Ultimately, whoever succeeded in marrying Ayume would simultaneously become the heir to the Tsukahara family and the direct descendant of Bokuden. Becoming the rightful successor to the *Bokuden* style — the most widespread and glorious of all *Shinto* style factions — was the goal desired by all swordsmen of the Shinto school. If this was accompanied by the joy of being able to marry the extraordinarily beautiful Ayume, it was natural that everyone was engrossed in it.

Many swordsmen presented themselves as suitors to Ayume, but Urabe Haruie rejected them all. Needless to say, the reason was that he was betting on his second son, Shintaro Haruhide, who had left to travel the country to train as a samurai and had already returned.

Right now it was enough for him to prove himself in this great tournament with the proper expertise to become a worthy successor to the Bokuden style. He did not necessarily expect him to win. He was still young, after all. He did not find it easy to defeat the veterans Kouda, Iizasa, and Kashiwabara. He was satisfied that he showed enough merit to be considered a young man with a promising future.

If, by any chance, he had the good fortune to win the tournament, and also managed to win the duel arranged by Suruga's great advisor and become the instructor of his house, it would be a totally unexpected and lucky event.

How the spirit of his uncle and master Bokuden would also rejoice if that were to happen!

This was the opinion of Haruie, who, despite remaining vigorous in spite of his more than eighty years, was already in his final years and had all his hopes put into that great tournament.

—Ayume... — after giving her tongue a brief rest, Kayo began to move it quickly again, — Rumor has it that this year's tournament looks like it will somehow turn into a fight for Ayume.

—I've had enough of this talk, — Ayume frowned.

—Wow! Are you angry? — said Kayo, and approached her to examine his face, but suddenly, as if frightened, she clutched her chest with both sleeves.

—What's the matter with you?

—Look there... Mizutani...

They could see that Yatsuya was walking towards them through an artificial mound in the garden, looking in the typical "gazing around the garden" pose.

—He's coming this way.

—I am going back inside, — said Ayume, but when he began to get up Kayo pulled her arm tightly.

—No, stay here, — Kayo said and, as if absent, pretended to look inside the pond.

—Oh, well... — a voice above their heads began to say, and a young man's face reflected on the surface of the water.

—Go away! — naturally it was Kayo who looked up and exclaimed as if she had just seen him for the first time.

—I am sorry to have disturbed you. That's... — Yatsuya apologized, but made no move to leave. He stared at the girls — or rather, he stared at Ayume.

—You must be Mizutani, — suggested Kayo, smiling.

—Eh... yes, I am Mizutani Yatsuya.

—I'm Kayo.

—Ah, lord Urabe's granddaughter.

—Yes, and this is Ayume.

—I already know her.

—What do you mean?

—I know her very well. Ayume, the daughter of the late lord Tsukahara, — he added, emphasizing every word.

—Well, this is the first time I've seen you... — said Ayume and looked away.

—Yes, you are right, but I know you very well.

III

—Heh-heh-heh! Ayume, if you'll excuse me, I have to go, — it seems that precocious Kayo enjoyed putting Ayume in a tight spot. After saying this she left in a hurry.

—Hey, Kayo! Me too... — Ayume said and hurried to follow her, but Yatsuya stopped her.

—Ayume...

—Yes?

—I finally got to meet you, — He kept staring at her face without looking away for a moment. If he could adopt such an attitude in front of such a

beautiful woman, it was no doubt because this man had great confidence in his own beauty.

Ayume kept a silence that came to mean, "What do you want to tell me?". She looked up and for the first time saw the man clearly.

—Ayume, this is probably the first time you have seen me. However, I've seen you many times.

—What?

—The first time I saw you was last year, during the great autumn festival at the shrine of Katori. You were accompanied by lord Urabe. Right?

—Yes.

—The next time was after the New Year's greeting ceremony, you were talking to lord Shintaro Haruhide in front of the oratory of this shrine.

Ayume got an uneasy feeling in her stomach, which prevented her from uttering any reply, thinking that perhaps he might have heard what she and Shintaro, who had just returned from their trip across the country to improve their technique, were talking about on that occasion.

—I was envious of Shintaro as I watched him talk so familiarly with a woman as beautiful as you.

"I am sick of your rudeness", Ayume thought, and looked away.

—The third time was only about ten days ago. You were alone, standing in front of the entrance to the sanctuary. I was glad to see you alone, but you seemed to be very sad. At that moment, I wanted to hurry up and talk to you. If Kayo, who was here a moment ago, had not appeared, that is surely what I would have done.

After a few moments of significant silence, he continued:

—That time I wasn't there because I had something to do. I just couldn't forget about you, and I thought if I could only see you one more time — so I hesitated to come here. And, fortunately, I got to see you, alone.

Ayume was considerably surprised by the impudence with which this young man named Yatsuya, a stranger she was seeing for the first time, was courting her. However, she had already had several experiences where someone was unexpectedly sincere and confessed his love to her.

The first such experience was when Iizasa Shurinosuke, whom she considered a father or uncle, suddenly revealed to her that he loved her. At first she did not fully understand what he was saying. Then she came to the conclusion that he was mocking her. Finally, she became afraid and began to cry.

—Ayume, your father Akichika and I were very close friends. I've known you since you were a baby. Now that you're older, I find it embarrassing to tell you these things, because I saw you as a daughter. But it's all useless.

As soon as I think of you, my body burns like a flame. I've tried to scold myself with all my might: "It can't be, give up! Hey, that's not right, stupid, forget about it!" But it's no use. These last years, not even in my dreams have I been able to forget about you. Come on, Ayume, have mercy on my heart, I beg you, Ayume.

She didn't know what to say in the face of such a confession from someone older than her and whom she respected as a swordsman, guardian of the tradition of the Tenshin Shoden Shinto school, and as a substitute for her late father.

—Talk to grandpa Urabe... — that was all she could say to get out of the way, but for three days she had nightmares of Shurinosuke's bearded face showing its fangs and pouncing on her.

Fortunately, Urabe Haruie rejected his proposal. Still, Shurinosuke seemed to be obsessed with her.

The next such experience was with Kouda Rokuzaemon. Kouda came from the family of Shinto priests at the shrine. As one of the four families that served as advisors to the Kashima clan of the great shrine priest, the Urabe family had maintained a close relationship with his family for generations, both in terms of professional duties and in the area of the sword.

Although he had been casting insistent glances at Ayume's body for some time, no one seemed to notice. Upon learning that Shurinosuke had proposed and been rejected, he immediately began to court Ayume. He had abstained until then, it seemed, because of his age, but since Shurinosuke, who was older than he, had proposed, he thought he could dare to do so as well without any qualms.

—Ayume, the days when shrine territories covered over one thousand eight hundred hectares are gone, now the territory that the shogunate gives to shrines and temples is barely two thousand *koku*. The family circle of this great shrine is in great need. However, in my family we have thought for generations about methods to increase our wealth, and now we have money saved and also unregistered rice crops, for which we do not pay tribute, in the Shimosa region. If you become part of my family, you will never lack anything.

This extremely pragmatic speech was totally inappropriate to tempt the heart of a young girl.

Furthermore, Ayume disliked this man from the beginning, and his manner of speaking about the ruin that befell the Tsukahara family following the death of her parents, as if to belittle rather than surprise her, outraged her.

—Lord Kouda, as the current head of the Kashima family, you have an obligation to preserve the Katori Shinto style. I, for one, am an only child and successor to the Tsukahara family. What you have just asked of me cannot happen.

—Why? The child born of our union would be a worthy successor to the Tsukahara family. And I would do everything I could to make the Tsukahara family's situation considerably better.

—No matter how incompetent I am, I'll take care of the Tsukahara family myself. You have nothing to worry about, — Ayume declared drastically. How many times she has experienced these unpleasant emotions! Each time someone whispered their love to her, she was either surprised and perplexed, or outraged and saddened and ran away. There was only one man to whom, instead of fleeing in surprise, she gently pressed her burning cheeks to her modest, heartbreaking, and happy chest: Shintaro. With the memory of that occasion deep in her heart, Ayume looked up firmly and responded to Yatsuya:

—Mizutani, tomorrow you have an important official tournament ahead of you. Do not waste time talking about trivial things and concentrate seriously on the tournament, — Ayume intended her words to be as sharp and cold as possible. However, they had the opposite effect on Yatsuya, who was stunned and even more fascinated by the unusually solemn beauty of her elegant and deeply chiseled features.

"This one is different from any of the other women I have courted so far. This is a real gem", thought Yatsuya, and for the first time his whole body shook.

—Ayume, is that tournament so important?

—Isn't it obvious? Everyone says so: "an event of the utmost importance that will decide the fate of the Shinto style".

—Ha-ha-ha! That's right, you're absolutely right. But as far as I'm concerned, getting your heart seems more important than the fate of Shinto Style.

—Mizutani, what are you saying?

—Well, Ayume, since I've told you all this, I'll fight with all my might in tomorrow's tournament. And in return, if I win the tournament, will you accept my proposal?

—But I... As heir to the Tsukahara family...

—I understand. But if I were the winner of the tournament and became your husband, no one would have to object to me restoring the Tsukahara family. I am a disciple of master Hijiko, but I have no attachment to the *Ippa* style. I would be happy to preserve the *Bokuden* style with you.

"What an uncompromising man! Who would accept someone like that...?"
As if he had interpreted Ayume's prolonged silence as consent, Yatsuya suddenly tried to take her hand.

—None of that! How dare you? — Ayume brusquely pushed him aside and ran away.

Yatsuya began to chase her insistently, but just then there were shouts in the distance from the *dojo*:

—Ooh!

—This is very serious!

—Hinatsu!

—Quick, someone come here!

Confused shouts were heard and people were running up from all directions.

—Ayume, excuse me. Don't forget about tomorrow.

Yatsuya, too, ran to where the attention of all the people was directed. On the west side of the *dojo* a crowd had swarmed, cursing and making a fuss.

—What happened?

Yatsuya pushed his way through the crowd and moved forward.

Hinatsu Kizaemon Shigeyoshi, the overwhelming favorite for victory in the tournament the next day, was dead with his head pressed against the wooden panels of the *dojo*. He had apparently been cut on the back by a sword. His clothing was torn from his shoulder to his back, and was soaked with blood that dripped to the floor.

Under the rays of the spring sun just before sunset, the acrid, raw stench that came to his nostrils was laden with bloodlust and a venomous mystery.

IV

Urabe Shintaro Haruhide was kneeling in front of the tombstone of Bokuden, Urabe's great-uncle and founder of the school, and his wife. The gravestone was engraved with the posthumous names of both of them, according to Buddhist custom. It was a very happy marriage and even after death they lay huddled under the same tombstone, side by side. The young Shintaro longed for the life they had led as something sacred: besides being an unparalleled saint of the sword, Bokuden was also a loving husband and Tae, besides being an incomparable beauty, was a faithful wife. For many years, the dream of this young man was to be able to have a relationship as harmonious as that with Ayume, and to become such a distinguished swordsman.

In addition to praying respectfully for their happiness in the other world, he also prayed for victory in the tournament the next day. When Shintaro rose after a short time, his eyes were refreshingly clear. All that remained for him to do before the tournament was to rid himself of all worldly thoughts and crystallize all his energy into the blade.

If he had deliberately avoided meeting his beloved Ayume since this morning and had come to this secluded spot to visit the tomb of Bokuden, it was only because he feared that his heart might be troubled by seeing his beloved become the center of attention for so many swordsmen.

"I will win, I am sure", Shintaro said to himself as he waved his arms vigorously and felt his whole body brimming with youth and vitality. He went down the hill and mounted his horse, which he had left tied to a tree. Silently, he directed the horse's head toward the shrine at Kashima. He rode along the path surrounded by an increasingly cold air as the sun began to set.

Though his intention was to rid himself of all worldly thoughts, as expected there was one recurring thought that he could not get out of his head: the tournament the next day.

"All the swordsmen have arrived by now. Uncle Iizasa, too, and Kouda Rokuzaemon Shido."

"There'll also be that Mizutani Yatsuya whom master Hijiko is constantly praising. What kind of man will he be? And how much is he skilled?"

"I heard that this Kashiwabara is a veteran of the same school as Arima Yasunobu, with whom I fought in Kii Province. And Yasunobu was hard to beat."

"And then there's Hinatsu, of the Ten Style, another rather difficult opponent."

"Who will I have to fight? It would be bad luck if I had to fight either Uncle Iizasa or Kouda, both of whom seem to be obsessed with Ayume... But well, once I'm at the place of the duel, I'll forget all about Ayume, I'll concentrate entirely on my sword against the opponent's, and use all my strength and skill."

Shintaro was riding and meditating on these matters when he suddenly plunged his head into the horse's mane. A sharp arrow grazed the back of his neck and plunged into the ground. It was not that Shintaro knew it was an arrow and consciously dodged it, but rather that it was an instinctive movement characteristic of a swordsman when he sensed something cutting through the air and flying towards him.

He then flashed his *katana* to repel the second arrow that flew at him.

Then Shintaro laid his body on the horse as low as he could and kicked the

animal in the abdomen in an attempt to gallop away. He had no time to determine where the arrows were being launched from and prepare a counterattack in that direction. Even if he did, however, Shintaro would have done no such thing. The founder of the school, Bokuden, used to repeat the following doctrine: the best way to avoid danger is not by standing up to it, but by moving away from it. Bokuden was a very cautious and humble swordsman who, if he met a wild horse tied up in his path, was able to make a detour expressly in order to avoid danger. The sword is not made to attack, but to defend oneself, it avoids danger as much as possible and, only when absolutely necessary, inflicts a final blow in self-defense: this was the true essence of the technique of a Bokuden-style sword.

Shintaro galloped on the back of his horse at full speed.

A man was watching him as he rode away and snapped his tongue in irritation:

—Tch... It just slipped out.

It was a samurai of about thirty-three or thirty-four years of age, armed with bow and arrows, who had left his horse tied up among the trees on the slightly raised hill on the east side of the road. Seeing that the third arrow he had prepared was no longer going to reach its target, he released it from the bow string and clicked his tongue again in hatred. Just then, an intensely angry voice roared behind him:

—Rokuzaemon!

—Oh! Shurinosuke!

Kouda Rokuzaemon turned around and the expression on his face changed radically: the anguish, rage and humiliation caused his eyes, mouth and nose to twist in an extremely atrocious manner.

"I have been discovered in an unexpected way, and on top of that — precisely by Iizasa Shurinosuke..."

Sweat began to pour from Rokuzaemon's forehead. Yet his body remained motionless, as if petrified.

He held an arrow in his right hand and a bow in his left, while Shurinosuke had his right hand on the hilt of the *katana* that hung from his hip.

"If I make a single false move, he will kill me."

It was this fear that hindered Rokuzaemon's mobility.

—You're a coward, Rokuzaemon! — Shurinosuke rebuked him with a voice that mixed disgust and contempt, — What you have done is not fit of a swordsman. How could you stoop so low?

Rokuzaemon did not respond. Or rather, he found it impossible to answer.

He had no room to justify himself, as he had caught him in the very scene of his despicable surprise attack.

—I have known you for some time, but I never thought you were capable of such a thing. From noon your behaviour seemed a little strange to me, so I followed you here in secret, but what I have seen is a most deplorable act, — without relaxing his hand on the *katana*, Shurinosuke continued, — I know you are in love with Ayume. It is also clear that Ayume is attracted to Shintaro. I have also once thought that if he did not exist, perhaps Ayume would be mine. But Rokuzaemon, no matter how much I think about it, Akichika, his father, was our own partner, and Shintaro is just a kid who has thought of me as an uncle and you as an older brother ever since he was a boy. Trying to kill him by shooting an arrow at him from a distance! — His voice grew louder and his tone was bitter, —

Rokuzaemon, if you intend to compete with Shintaro for Ayume, why not do so by playing fair, fighting face to face with the sword?

—I am sorry! — Rokuzaemon groaned, bowed his head and dropped the bow in his left hand, — Forgive me, Shurinosuke. A demon had crept into my heart. I am ashamed of what I have done. Please forgive me.

As he saw Rokuzaemon's sorry face as he spoke these words as he wiped the sweat from his brow, the onslaught of Shurinosuke's fury weakened.

—It is not for me to say if you are forgiven or not. The only thing you can do is be ashamed of yourself and never do such a thing again. I for one will pretend that I have seen nothing. Rokuzaemon, face Shintaro honorably, like a good swordsman.

—But it's just that... I am no longer qualified to face Shintaro, nor to participate in a duel. I will not be attending the tournament tomorrow.

—You do not need to go that far. Expunge your repentant heart and fight with dignity.

—No, it's no use. Even I dislike my corrupt nature. I will never again wield a sword. Shurinosuke, that's the least I can do to apologize to Shintaro,

—All right, Rokuzaemon, I'm glad to see you're feeling genuinely embarrassed.

As his childhood friend lowered his head, dejected to admit his guilt, Shurinosuke was overcome from the depths of his chest by a heavy, dark, and desolate feeling.

Shurinosuke took his hand off the hilt of his *katana*, blinked in grief, and made an attempt to walk. But just seconds after his guard was down, Rokuzaemon lunged at him and, like the fangs of a leopard, pierced his side with the arrow he still held in his right hand.

—Rokuza... You wretch!

Shurinosuke had barely had time to draw an inch of his blade when he collapsed into the dry grass. Without missing a beat, Rokuzaemon pulled the arrow from his side and struck Shurinosuke a lethal blow to the neck. It was *uchinejutsu*, also known as *tetsukiya* — the art of shooting or drawing the arrow without using the bow. Also part of the Katori Shinto style was the use of arrows, *shurikens* and *yoroidoshi* short swords. Unlike the new fencing practiced since Yagyu, from the beginning the Shinto style sought to preserve the traditional fencing style of the Sengoku era (1467-1568) by mastering not only the sword, but also the spear, bow, *jujutsu*²⁹ and *uchine* arrow.

Rokuzaemon stood upright and could not suppress a smirk at his own prowess with *uchinejutsu*.

He looked down at the body of his childhood friend lying on the ground, and on his face there was no longer any trace of the repentance and anguish he had shown until just a moment ago.

V

By the time Shintaro returned to the shrine, the sun had already set and the lamps in the main building were already lit.

Every building in the compound was brimming with swordsmen from every corner. There were some who, in preparation for the next day's tournament, had soon retired to their assigned bedrooms. There was also a group who had been left discussing intensely in the great hall, and others who were so excited that they did not know quite what to do and had gone out into the garden to show how hard they were to endure the slight cold in front of a fire.

Shintaro told no one what had just happened to him.

"I don't even know who my attacker was, I can't cause a commotion."

This was something he had been thinking about on the way, but besides, the first thing Shintaro learned upon his return was the strange incident of the violent death of Hinatsu Kizaemon.

To Shintaro's questions, his father Haruie only responded by raising his white eyebrows and shaking his head.

It was evident that his old heart was very much in pain because such an unprecedentedly unfortunate incident had occurred on the eve of the

²⁹ *Martial art of hand-to-hand combat, precursor of judo.*

festival.

Shintaro left his father and went to see his older brother Harutsugi.

—Do you have any idea who Hinatsu's killer might be?

—No, I haven't the slightest idea.

—But there should not be many people skilled enough to bring down someone like Hinatsu with a single sword strike. Well, that is what you would expect in the case of a formal sword-sword match, but it seems Hinatsu was attacked from behind without warning.

—Even so, even if he did not come face to face with it, he should not be an easy opponent...

—Perhaps the assassin and Hinatsu knew each other very well. Hinatsu would have dropped his guard in his presence, and the assassin would wait until Hinatsu turned his back on him to attack. The cut he gave him was spectacular, worthy of someone with an uncommon ability.

Even if all of this were clear, they still had not a single suspect.

"Does this have anything to do with the arrows that were shot at me?"

As he walked down the long corridor to retire to his chambers, Shintaro was overcome by a stifling unease: he had the impression that a sinister presence was spreading throughout the shrine compound.

—Uncle Shintaro, — a voice called to him. It was Kayo, the daughter of his elder brother Harutsugi. He was so young to be an uncle that when she called him that, it was a little embarrassing.

—Oh! Is that you, Kayo? Haven't you gone to bed yet?

—Whoa! What do you mean "yet"? It's still early! Changing the subject...

Uncle, did you hear what happened?

—I guess you mean about Hinatsu. I'm sorry.

—That's right, people don't talk about anything else. Besides, Ayume is very worried...

—And what's Ayume so worried about?

—I'll tell you, Uncle... If I tell you that Ayume is worried, it'll be because of you, of course.

—What nonsense... She has no reason to worry.

—Even if she has no reason, it's fine to worry. You don't understand the heart of a young woman.

—Maybe... I'm sorry.

—You don't have to apologize, but it would be good if you went to see Ayume, even if it was only for a little while. She's in my room now.

—No... Not today.

—Why not?

—Because I don't...

—Poor little Ayume! Go see her, just for a moment...

—But it's not right that I'm going to see her now, at night...

While the young uncle and his niece were having this trivial conversation, in a room less than thirty-five meters away, a horrible event was taking place without anyone knowing it.

In that room there were two young men. One of them was the handsome swordsman who has already appeared in this story, Mizutani Yatsuya. The other was the representative of the Arima style, Kashiwabara Shinobee. The latter was a burly man in his thirties, with dark skin and prominent cheekbones, apparently with a great desire for fame.

—I have already done what I promised, — said a grumpy Shinobee.

—Shintaro went out in the morning and was absent all day, so there was nothing to do. But there's still more than enough time left until the tournament tomorrow. Don't worry, leave everything to me.

—That guy's great. In Kii Province he defeated Arima Yasunobu.

—Heh.

—You're that confident? You'd better not get too confident.

—I guess we're evenly matched on skill. But I'm smarter than he is. If I use my head to devise a ploy, you have nothing to worry about; even if I don't kill him, it will be enough if he doesn't show up for tomorrow's tournament.

—And you'll be able to accomplish such a thing?

—Yes, that's my intention.

The two men had met and an agreement had been made between them to collaborate in a conspiracy. The goals of their machinations were the social status of the successor to the school of Bokuden and taking Ayume as a wife, and between the two of them these two originally indivisible desires were shared. Obviously, the one who wanted Ayume was Mizutani Yatsuya, while Shinobee, who had no interest in women, would be left with the prestige of being the successor of the Bokuden style.

Of the top six favorites to win the tournament of the six representatives from each faction of the Shinto style, Iizasa Shurinosuke and Kouda Rokuzaemon had already been eliminated from the list of possible competitors. For several years now, these two had been virtually alternating as winners of the tournament, but still neither had succeeded Ayume and thus neither would become the official successor to the Bokuden style. Presumably, even if one of them won again this year, the result would be the same.

The remaining competitors were Urabe Shintaro and Hinatsu Kizaemon. If they managed to kill them before the tournament, or at least injure them so

that they could not participate in it, then only the two would be left: Shinobee and Yatsuya. Between the two they had agreed that in the final duel of the tournament they would draw and one of them would get the beautiful woman and the other the prestige of the school.

Shinobee took it upon himself to assassinate Hinatsu Kizaemon, an acquaintance of his. He lured him to the back of the *dojo* and they stood side by side, with Shinobee to the left of Kizaemon.

It is most comfortable to attack a target on your right from the left, while attacking from the right is not so easy.

They were exchanging trivial comments in that position for a while, until suddenly Shinobee said to Kizaemon:

—Look there! Shintaro and Ayume are hugging each other! — he pointed to a thicket of trees about thirty-five yards away on the right.

—Huh? Where?

—Under the shade of that big shii tree.

Kizaemon leaned halfway down and as soon as he turned his attention in that direction, Shinobee's *katana* emitted a silvery flash. Without even being able to raise his voice, Kizaemon collapsed and crawled about six or seven inches, clinging to the ground. Seeing that Kizaemon had stopped breathing, Shinobee cleaned his *katana* and left the place as if he had.

Due to the hustle and bustle of dinner time, no one noticed anything for a while. After that he retreated to his chambers and never set foot outside again. Now he was urging Yatsuya to hurry up and do something about Shintaro.

—Anyway, your deed was spectacular, — Yatsuya flattered him to win his favor.

—With your back turned, it is not something to be proud of either, — Shinobee replied somewhat flushed.

—No way! A man like Hinatsu cannot be taken down by just anyone, — Yatsuya took out the bundle he had brought and added, — Well, leave Shintaro to me. I thought we could celebrate in advance by having a drink, so I brought some of the master's sake.

—I heard that Hijiko is very fond of sake, — Shinobee didn't exactly give him the creeps either.

—That's right, and that's precisely why you can be sure it's good quality.

—Tomorrow's the big day, so we'd better not drink too much.

—Why? It's already been decided that you and I are going to end up in a draw!

—Heh! Well, now that you mention it, it's true.

The two of them continued their conversation in a whisper, with a small glass of sake in their hands. They told each other it was time to quit, but in the meantime they drank their own.

Shinobee was the first to go to bed. Soon after, Yatsuya picked up the bundle and snuck out of the room.

The next morning, a person who had thought it suspicious that Shinobee would not leave his room opened the paper sliding door and gave a shriek of horror.

—It's horrible! Kashiwabara has vomited blood and died!

Immediately after it was officially announced that this third victim had suffered a sudden death due to food poisoning coupled with excess alcohol, word also came that the body of Iizasa Shurinosuke had been discovered on the small hill of Nanaomura, and all the people gathered in the shrine compound shuddered in terror.

An unusually dark and sinister atmosphere enveloped the entire shrine in a heavy, shadowy veil.

VI

The sky was overcast and plunged into a murky leaden color. Shintaro walked thoughtfully through the lush grove that connected with the western entrance to the shrine.

The tournament had already begun inside the grounds. Throughout the morning, duels would take place between, so to speak, the lower level participants. Starting in the afternoon, duels would be held between intermediate and advanced level opponents, and finally the final battle between the representatives of each faction. By then it would probably be more or less monkey time — four o'clock in the afternoon.

However, of the six representatives of the six factions of the Shinto style, three of them had suffered a violent and totally unexpected death just before the tournament.

Understandably, as a swordsman representing one of the factions, Shintaro would have been greatly impacted by this. Both Hinatsu Kizaemon and Kashiwabara Shinobee were rivals that he was eager to face at some point. He thought it a pity and felt sorry for them. But he felt most sorry for Iizasa Shurinosuke. Shintaro had always felt sympathy for that middle-aged swordsman, a friend of his father's. He had also taught him basic lessons about the sword when Shintaro was a child. He had a close relationship with Shintaro, as if he was Shintaro's own uncle.

Interestingly, even when he learned that Shurinosuke was competing with him for Ayume's love, no feelings of antagonism were stirring in Shintaro. He was a trustworthy man, always acting cleanly, even when competing for the love of a woman.

Shurinosuke had died after an arrow pierced his neck. And it seems he had an arrow wound in his side as well. It was clear that the arrows had not been fired from a distance.

"Who could have been the murderer? As soon as I know, I will avenge his death", Shintaro swore to himself in his heart.

He knew full well that it was not in his best interest to become so tense and nervous about other people's business just before the evening bouts of the tournament, but precisely because he did not know who the opponent was that he could vent his anger on, it became even more exasperating and intense.

Cries of admiration could be heard from the arena where the duels were taking place, causing Shintaro to pause and turn his head.

—Oh, — he exclaimed in surprise as he turned around, looking up, for he recognized the silhouette of Mizutani Yatsuya coming out of the western entrance and looking around for someone.

Hijiko Doronosuke had introduced him to Yatsuya earlier that morning. Even then, he had the impression that Yatsuya had something in particular he wanted to discuss with him.

"Maybe he's looking for me..."

Shintaro stepped on the bushes and went out to meet Yatsuya.

—Ah, Urabe! I thought you might be here somewhere.

—Can I help you? — Shintaro stood in front of Yatsuya.

Yatsuya looked around and invited him back to the grove where Shintaro had been wandering until just a moment ago.

"We can't stand here and talk any longer. We'd better go that way", he said, pointing to a tree stump.

After the recent events, Shintaro was cautious and did not neglect for a moment, but he did not sense any hostility or murderous intent, judging by Yatsuya's appearance.

—Urabe, I will speak to you plainly. I saw Kashiwabara's body this morning. Apart from the person who discovered it, there were only a couple of other people then, and I was able to pick this up off the ground. He pulled an *inro*³⁰ from his chest and offered it to Shintaro. Shintaro took

³⁰ A small box that used to be hung from the obi to hold the seal, medicines or other small objects, since kimonos did not have pockets. The strings that held it to the obi had a carved piece, called a netsuke, that served as a safety feature.

it in his hands, wondering what it meant, but as he scrutinized it, the expression on his face changed dramatically.

Yatsuya adopted a penetrating look and as he looked intently at Shintaro's face and he continued:

—Urabe, there is more. Yesterday afternoon, when it was discovered that Hinatsu had been murdered, I was one of the first to hurry to the scene of the crime — and there I picked this up, — he handed Shintaro a small *netsuke*.

The moment he saw it, the look of bewilderment grew on Shintaro's face.

—What difference does it make if these objects were found lying around?

— Shintaro replied after a while, but his voice was unusually shaky and unsure.

—In both cases, while I was present in those places, your honorable father, lord Urabe Haruie, had not yet made an appearance.

Yatsuya was silent for a moment and waited for his words to take effect.

—The *inro* and the *netsuke* of lord Haruie appeared in those places, but lord Haruie had not yet appeared there — that is all I am saying.

—Are you suggesting that my father is the murderer? — Shintaro shouted at him in anger.

—I said no such thing. All I have said is that two murders have been committed, and at the scenes of the crime of both, lord Haruie's belongings have been found, just that. I was unable to determine whether or not I should tell people about this, so I wanted to see you for advice.

—Well, let's ask my father directly. Please come with me.

—Yes, that's not a bad idea. Hijiko and the others could also be present...

But, Urabe, as a result... — Yatsuya suddenly stopped and adopted an enigmatic expression, as if reflecting on something, — Obviously, lord Haruie will reply that he knows nothing about the matter. Of course, your honourable father cannot be involved in two cases of murder. I am firmly convinced of that. But the problem is what others will think.

"It is understandable to think that your father wishes you to win the tournament, for everyone knows that. On the other hand, there's the violent death of three of the main favourites to win the tournament. I do not know all the details of Shurinosuke's death, but it is known that personal items of your honorable father have been found in the places where Hinatsu and Kashiwabara died violently... So what? What kind of rumors will the people of this society, who do not keep quiet and do not know right from wrong, spread? And whatever the rumors are, can the rumors be stopped?"

Yatsuya expressed himself with a maturity that did not correspond to his youth, showing compassion and perplexity to try to convince him.

A fiery flame swirled through Shintaro's head in a whirlwind. The two objects he had shown him were undoubtedly those his father Haruie always carried on his person.

He knew only too well that his elderly father showed favoritism for him, and that what he wished above all else was to elevate his prestige as a swordsman.

Although he firmly believed that his father was utterly incapable of committing such a vile act as the murder of two of his competitors, the fact was that, in the face of the material evidence that Yatsuya had shown him, he had not a single shred of proof to refute such suspicions.

—Urabe, calm down and listen to me. In reality, there are already people who suspect lord Haruie.

—Huh?

—Of course, they have no proofs. They're simply circulating a vague rumour. I suppose it all comes from the thought that a man like Hinatsu cannot be killed by anyone with a single sword, even from behind. Or perhaps because in order to offer the ever cautious Kashiwabara poisoned sake, it could only have been someone he trusted enough... Or someone in authority. These are wild and extremely inconsiderate speculations. But as absurd as it may seem, such talk must be stopped.

—You're right. I've been such a fool!

—We can't get excited. We have to think calmly about the best way to solve this matter. I give you these two objects. Do with them as you see fit. This way you don't have to worry about the evidence. The evidence is only what people see. The evidence disappears.

—Yes, but...

—But the vague rumors will remain. There's only one way to get rid of them.

—What's the right thing to do? — Shintaro asked impatiently, not realizing that he had unwittingly allowed himself to be cornered into a position of admitting the suspicion that his father Haruie might be the murderer.

—You have to give up the tournament.

—How? Me, leave the tournament? — Shintaro shouted, stunned.

—Lower your tone. Say that you have suffered from a tepentine illness, or make some other excuse, and give up the tournament. If you do, all these absurd rumours will disappear at once, society this puerile, — Yatsuya smiled tenderly at Shintaro, who was completely bewildered by such an unimaginable proposition, and to disarm him further, Yatsuya said, —

Urabe, let me tell you something so that you do not misunderstand me. It is not my intention to prevent you from participating in the tournament so I can take the win. If you are not participating, I suppose the final duel would be between Kouda Rokuzaemon and myself, but I assure you that I will not be the winner. It is not that I necessarily believe that Kouda will defeat me, but if you are excluded, he would let me win to avoid becoming the representative of the Shinto style. The real final duel I would like to see is between you and me, any day now. The true representative of the Shinto style should be decided then.

No one knows where Shintaro hid from that moment until nightfall, or with what intention he did so.

At monkey time, just as the last duel of the tournament was about to begin, a startling piece of news arrived that made the swordsmen who attended in the combat chamber not believe what they were hearing.

The warning was as follows:

"Urabe Shintaro suddenly began to feel unwell since last night and his condition has worsened, making it impossible for him to participate in the duel."

Thus, the only contenders left for the final duel were:

Katori Shinto style: Kouda Rokuzaemon Shido.

Ippa style: Mizutani Yatsuya Mitsunobu.

The two opponents entered the dueling arena with, for various reasons, an enigmatic smile on their faces: Rokuzaemon, thirty-three years old and fearless, in his virile prime; Yatsuya, twenty-five, with her beautiful, glowing face.

Despite the fact that interest in the final match of the tournament had been halved by the failure of four of the six candidates to participate — due to the death of one and the withdrawal of the other — as soon as the two opponents advanced to the centre of the stage of the fight with their wooden sabres, the hall went into a frenzy and then there was silence.

The two, with wooden swords about two meters apart, were slowly approaching each other through the leaden atmosphere under the cloudy sky, charged with the same sinister murderous desire as if they were steel swords.

Finally, Rokuzaemon uttered a majestic cry of attack and lowered his wooden sword, which he held in both hands high on the right, over Yatsuya's shoulder.

It was unclear whether Yatsuya would take the blow or dodge it... but just

then he hurled his body toward Rokuzaemon like a bird in flight, brushing past the left side of his torso and, as Rokuzaemon turned, came face to face with the positions changed: the one on the east side was now in the west, and vice versa.

In the eyes of the onlookers, the only thing that seemed to have changed was the positions of the two contestants. Yet another unusual change had occurred as well: Rokuzaemon's face, which had been oozing with vitality and self-confidence until now, was suddenly filled with a look of remarkable consternation, while Yatsuya was staring at him with a look that was already boasting of victory.

At the moment the two had crossed paths and rotated their bodies, Yatsuya had whispered a few brief words in Rokuzaemon's ear in a piercing voice: —It's a pity you don't have your *uchine* arrow now.

Not that Yatsuya had any proof of that. He had simply remembered the connection between the Katori Shinto style and the use of *uchine* arrows, and set his rival up to confirm that conjecture. This ruse, however, stuck in Rokuzaemon's chest as if it were really a sharp arrow.

Yatsuya was not so foolish as to let Rokuzaemon's momentary confusion pass. Yatsuya shouted and lunged at his rival.

—End of the fight! — echoed powerfully the voice of the referee Hijiko Doronosuke.

Yatsuya's wooden sword had dealt a severe blow to Rokuzaemon's forearm.

EVENTS OF EDO

I

Edo, spring of the sixth year of the Kan'ei era (1629).

The cherry blossoms had already fallen, and under the sun that was already too hot, a ceaseless queue of ox carts loaded with stones and wood was heading towards the castle. The reason for this was the great construction work on Edo Castle, a project that lasted a decade, from that year to the sixteenth year of the Kan'ei era.

The main tower of the castle had already been built. With its five roof levels and six floors, and a lookout point that dominated the landscape from a height of about 50 meters, you could even see the white glow of the ships that entered Edo Bay from the sea in the distance. At the time, it retained all the majesty of the early Edo shogunate, but later the keep was destroyed by the fire known as "the great Meireki fire"³¹ and was never rebuilt.

Edo had already become the most important large city in the country, surpassing Osaka and Kyoto with an area of almost three hundred hectares and a population of five hundred thousand people, although without a point of comparison with the figures it would reach at its peak: one thousand seven hundred hectares and a population of one million three hundred thousand.

The *daimyo's* mansions, which were lined up around the castle, preserved the Momoyama style and competed with each other in splendour and magnificence: the roofs were covered with gold, the eaves featured sculptures of lions and the gates were carved with images of tigers. It was only later that the *daimyo's* mansions became insular, uniform and sober, due to the restrictions imposed on their construction as a result of the recurring and devastating fires.

At that time, Edo was a boiling city with a vigorous idiosyncrasy that extended to all its corners, and at first glance one could see that the entire walled area gave off the feeling of being the center of the hegemony of the warrior class. The overwhelming majority of the people seen walking its streets were samurai, and they were also brave warriors who had survived the horrors of war fifteen years earlier in both the summer and winter siege campaigns of Osaka. And those who had reached fifty were experienced

³¹ *The great Meireki fire occurred in 1657 and destroyed much of the city of Edo. The Meireki era lasted from 1655 to 1658.*

samurai who had also participated in the battle of Sekigahara thirty years earlier, and even in previous military campaigns.

Through those streets of Edo where such impressive and somewhat brutal vestiges still lingered, the delicate and refreshing figure of a traveler, so refined that she looked like a little flower that had been plucked from the field in which she flourished, rushed. It was Ayume, who had come here alone from the shrine of Kashima in the province of Hitachi.

Urabe Shintaro Haruhide, the person she had prayed for to win the day of the tournament held on the occasion of the Kasuga festival and whom she trusted, had unexpectedly pretended to be ill just before the duel began and failed to show up. She had also given a brief message to Kayo that night ("I'm going to Edo") and left Kashima.

Soon a spiral of gossip broke out. There were those who said that he had chickened out, and also those who suggested that he had made proposals to Ayume but had been rejected and so had left. And then there were those who argued with trepidation that he might be related to the three murder cases.

More than the anguish over what might have happened to Shintaro, perhaps what weighed most heavily on Ayume's heart was resentment: "Why did he leave without giving me any explanation?"

—As the winner of the tournament, it is up to me to be the representative of the Shinto style. Do me the favor of granting me Ayume's hand and declare me successor of the glorious Bokuden style, — Mizutani Yatsuya proposed to Urabe Haruie, with an arrogant smile on his refined face. Haruie rejected the proposal without even asking Ayume's opinion, still distressed by the absence of his beloved son.

At Yatsuya's request, his teacher Hijiko Doronosuke visited him to repeat the same request insistently, and it was then that Haruie first called Ayume and asked him what her will was.

—In my heart I have already firmly decided that my wish is to become the wife of Shintaro, — Ayume declared instantly, with a forcefulness that contrasted with her usual demure character.

—I am pleased with your intentions, but that fool Shintaro has withdrawn from such an important tournament and is concealing his whereabouts from us, for whatever purpose. I am very sorry, for you as well. This old man can't think of any good ideas about which way to go from here.

As he finished speaking, Haruie lowered his graying head and rested it on his chest. But Ayume made a surprising statement again.

—Grandfather Urabe, Shintaro is not the sort of man to do such a thing for no reason. I will go out and find him myself.

—What? Find him, you say? But he only said he was going to Edo.

—Well, I'll go to Edo. I'm sure I can find Shintaro and ask him for his reasons.

In the round, black pupils of the girl was reflected her tormented soul, which burned like a flame. Haruie tried to dissuade her from such a vehement purpose, and suggested that she let herself be accompanied by someone, but Ayume refused.

—No, it will be more comfortable for me if you allow me to go and catch him myself, — said Ayume bravely, and the next day she left for Edo alone.

She went first to Matsuoka Sadayu Noritsugu's mansion, also of the Shinto school. Sadayu was the son and successor of Matsuoka Hyogonosuke, who was Bokuden's most accomplished disciple, and was now a *hatamoto* with a stipend of one hundred and twenty *koku*.

Despite the fact that Hyogonosuke held the position of fencing instructor in the house of the *shogun* along with Yagyu Munenori, the provincial governor of Tajima, and Ono Jiroemon Tadaaki, he received a low stipend that could not be compared to that of the Ono family, let alone the Yagyu, and ended his life with no shame or glory. His son Sadayu had already been stripped of the position of fencing instructor in the house of the *shogun* and, as a kind of successor to the Shinto style, he was allowed to instruct only a few *hatamoto* and *daimyo* vassals in the art.

His *dojo* was located near the entrance to Kojimachi and was as modest as any other *dojo* in the city. Moreover, Sadayu himself was already of an advanced age and had left the *dojo* solely in the hands of Kabuto

Gyobushosuke Yasunori and Tada Umanosuke Masakatsu. Tada was also a *hatamoto* but Kabuto, on the other hand, was a provincial samurai from the village of Otsuki — in the Kashima district of province Hitachi — who had previously been a student of Urabe Haruie.

For one thing or another, it can be said that it was only natural that Ayume should first go to the Matsuoka residence to try to find out Shintaro's whereabouts.

It was near sunset as Ayume approached Matsuoka's mansion and, as she went around the corner of the road, someone bumped violently into her.

—Hey, you! Be more careful!

It was obvious that the one who rebuked her so sharply and with a sinister

smile on his face was a *hatamoto yakko*³².

This one was different, however, from the young samurai of the post-Meireki era who wore a voluminous ponytail tied to the top of their heads, fastened with oil, and dressed subtly. This one had a false moustache shaped from molten wax mixed with turpentine, was dressed in a short kimono that barely reached the knee, and wore sandals without socks.

As he met the extraordinarily beautiful woman on the deserted street, and no doubt because he was a bit tipsy, he tried to pester her for a while.

—I'm sorry, I was in a hurry and I didn't mean to... — although she was fully aware of the cruelty of her interlocutor, Ayume apologized meekly and tried to continue on her way.

—Huh? Suddenly you are in a hurry? I'm sure you're going to see your lover. Why don't you stay with me?

He extended both arms and tried to hug her by the shoulders, but Ayume grabbed the wrist of his right hand slightly and twisted it.

—Ay, ay, ay! That hurts! — exclaimed the ruffian, jumped up and grimaced as if he had been burned, — What does this woman think she is doing?

He clenched his fists, got serious, and made a gesture to hit her, but Ayume moved away nimbly and stuck the top of the stick in her hand into his side. This does not mean that she was initiated into the martial arts. Both Haruie and Iizasa Shurinosuke had simply taught her a few basic self-defense moves, but the blood of ancestors who were excellent swordsmen ran through Ayume's veins.

A vandal fellow who used only brute force was no match for her.

—Disgraceful! Shit! — he called out in indignation and stood up again, but as he prepared to attack her a voice was heard behind Ayume's back.

—Ha! What a skill this girl has. She gave the punk a beating.

—What do you say, punk? Nobody asked you for an opinion.

As if to hide the shame of having been discovered in an embarrassing situation, the hooligan confronted the owner of that voice and tried to pounce on him recklessly, but this time his opponent threw him to the ground very ostentatiously and then he began to show his anger by repeatedly kicking ruffian's buttocks.

—You will remember this one! — were the only words he spat out in a stereotypical farewell before running away.

³² Young low-ranking *hatamoto* or *ronin* who in those times of peace were experiencing economic difficulties and felt alienated because they could not play their role as warriors; they formed gangs and roamed around the city committing all kinds of misdeeds. They were characterized by their extravagant clothing and hairstyles and by their smug attitude.

—I'm sorry to have caused you so much trouble, — Ayume smiled and then looked up at the man.

—Oh! Are you not Kabuto?

—Huh? Strange, — he just stared at her face. — And you are... Ayume?

—That's right, Kabuto. It's been a long time since we've seen each other.

—Oh! Miss Ayume... Ayume in the flesh, — he kept repeating over and over again with his eyes wide open because of the great surprise he had received.

Understandably, in the five years since Kabuto had gone without seeing her, he had acquired somewhat of an urban air and the years had given him an appearance of pomposity, but he was still the same, while Ayume had gone from being a young girl of twelve or thirteen to a woman of stunning beauty.

—What a surprise! Are you really Ayume? You have become so beautiful that you leave me speechless, — Kabuto wondered again amidst exclamations of surprise.

—Oh, what a thing to say! If you keep looking at me like that, you'll make me feel uncomfortable.

—Still, what a surprise. So, Ayume, what brings you to Edo?

—For certain reasons, I'm going to see Matsuoka.

II

Listening to the circumstances Ayume recounted, Matsuoka Sadayu nodded several times.

—I imagine that the old master Urabe must be distressed as well. I too will do everything in my power to help you find Shintaro. Now, it seems to me that if Shintaro were really in Edo, he would have come to visit me already. You'd better settle in to this mansion for a while, for a start.

Anyway, that had been her intention from the beginning. So, for a brief period of time, Ayume was residing at Matsuoka's house. And from that day on, the Matsuoka *dojo* underwent a mysterious transformation.

Obviously the *dojo* was in keeping with the modest stipend of one hundred and twenty *koku* that its owner received from the beginning, and likewise the *dojo* built within the residence was quite run down and did not seem to be doing very well. However, as if it had been renovated from top to bottom and even replaced the tatami, it now radiated freshness and, upon entering it, one was struck by a blinding luminosity. Such was the sudden change in appearance that it experienced, as if by magic, when a beautiful girl joined that home full of men.

Even the number of students who came to the *dojo* suddenly multiplied, and their voices also brought a refreshing liveliness to the place.

—Hey! Have you seen her?

—Yes, she's a beauty.

—You can tell she's related to master Bokuden of Kashima.

—She's the only legitimate descendant of master Bokuden. It is rumoured that she has come in search of a husband.

—Wow, that's a big word.

—Don't get your hopes up that you have nothing to do. For now, here I am.

—What nonsense are you talking about?

—Do you want to borrow a mirror?

—To me it's as if this world has become more interesting.

—Well, now I've got a death wish. To think that there's such a beautiful woman in this world makes me sad.

As soon as they saw Ayume, even in passing, the atmosphere around her became as bright as if a multitude of flowers were beginning to bloom, and if those black eyes smiled and waved casually, the young disciples' chests began to beat as when the drums of war were heard from the watchtowers. However, it seems that soon the sighs of admiration from these young people were transformed into whispers of resignation.

—Hey, it's impossible.

—Yes, we have nothing to do with those two.

—They're evenly matched in skill, but Umanosuke is better looking.

—Yes, but Umanosuke's the heir to the Tada family. He can't marry her and pass her on to his family. In that sense, being the third son of his family, Gyobu is one step ahead.

As much as the two companions in question, Kabuto Gyobu and Tada Umanosuke, tried hard not to show that passion on their faces, it was clear to anyone that they had both ended up falling in love with Ayume.

Umanosuke had already been completely charmed by Ayume from the first glance during their first meeting.

Since the day she turned twenty-one he had given herself completely to the blade, with no time to even look over his shoulder at the female universe. So, in a manner of speaking, this very formal man had had his soul turned upside down by Ayume. At all times the image of his sword appeared before his eyes, emitting a white glow, and above this image overlapped that of Ayume's pupils, which resembled a deep chasm brimming with a faint melancholy, and no matter how hard he tried to chase it away it did

not leave, no matter how hard he tried to placate it it did not disappear, and thus he was surprised at how it clouded his mind.

Even if he scolded himself and said that it was impossible, he could not prevent those black eyes from absorbing his heart and subjugating him completely. Even his virile spirit, forged in the belief of an immovable heart and the indivisibility of life and death, as soon as he cast a glance at the graceful figure of Ayume, instantly melted like fluffy snow bathed in the rays of the sun.

"What if I were to give up the Tada family?"

Umanosuke was astonished to realize that he had become so obsessed with the thought. But the amazement only strengthened his love for her.

For his part, Kabuto Gyobu at first tried in vain to adopt the attitude of an older brother to the girl with whom he had been familiar before.

Although this was his sincere intention, it soon proved to be unfeasible. It was impossible for him to speak to her as naturally as he had spoken to her five years earlier, when she was a twelve-year-old girl. If Gyobu forced himself to speak to her as he did then, his lips would begin to tremble strangely.

"She has become a beautiful woman", Gyobu repeated to himself with amazement.

"The fact that I was the first person Ayume, whom I have known for some time, met by chance here in Edo must be a matter of fate. She is the woman for whom I was predestined."

Such were the selfish thoughts that came into his head, typical of people who are in love.

Unlike Umanosuke, however, Gyobu had had turbulent relationships with several women up to now, but when compared to Ayume, they all didn't matter.

Indeed, Ayume possessed unparalleled beauty. But why did all the prominent swordsmen associated with the Shinto style, without exception, feel a fervent and irresistible love for her? It is something that cannot be rationally explained. Perhaps all that can be said is that it was a matter of mysterious divine will.

Captivated by the same thought, Gyobu and Umanosuke walked side by side across the Suruga plateau. Excavations were taking place at the southern end, and there were hundreds of laborers working at it in a hectic pace. Soil was being pulled from the plateau and transported to the far bay south of castle Edo to gain ground on the sea. It was in this manner that the territory from the Nihonbashi Hama-chuo area to Shinbashi and Tsukiji was later created, with land gained from the sea.

The two stopped their steps for no apparent reason and watched the pawns at work. Suddenly, Umanosuke broke the ice:

—Kabuto, I cannot keep quiet and hide it any longer. I will tell you clearly: I cannot get Ayume out of my mind.

Gyobu answered without turning, looking straight ahead:

—Tada, that's what I was going to tell you.

—I expected that, — Umanosuke sounded despondent, — I was already more or less suspicious of your feelings. It is tragic that the two of us, who are not only partners but also brothers, are in love with the same woman.

—Yes... But at this point, there's nothing we can do. Let's compete for Ayume to the end.

—Of course. I won't give up.

—Same here.

—The problem is what Ayume thinks...

—It's true. She's deeply in love with Urabe Shintaro.

They both knew Shintaro since, during his educational trip around the country, he had visited the Matsuoka *dojo* twice. Moreover, Gyobu had met Shintaro in Hitachi when he was a child.

—He is an imposing young man.

—I think the same, but before us...

—You're right. Wielding a sword, I don't think we're inferior to Shintaro.

While they were having this conversation, both felt something in their inner selves that was troubling their conscience. Master Matsuoka Sadayu had charged the two of them with going out to look for Shintaro, but they were not diligently giving themselves up to his search. Rather, they were deliberately neglecting the task entrusted to them.

If they found Shintaro, they would have to accompany him to Matsuoka house... and then they would have to bring him to Ayume. The thought of it made them both shudder.

"Ayume would immediately throw himself at Shintaro's chest."

At the thought, their heads would warm as if on fire, and their chests would turn cold as ice.

—We have to go find Shintaro, eh? — Gyobu forced himself to say the exact opposite of what he desired in his heart.

—Yes. And on top of that...

They didn't know how to proceed. Their faces became dark and serious, as if they had swallowed lead, and for a long time they were silent.

In the distance, below the plateau, the workers were diligently carrying on with their work. Though their minds were actually elsewhere, their eyes

were focused on those workers, until simultaneously they were both surprised by something and looked at each other.

—That's it...

—What's going on?

Right in the middle of the worker crowd there was a violent uproar of booing and movement of people.

III

In the center of the whirlpool formed by the tumult was the silhouette of a samurai. He was wearing a large straw hat that did not show his face well, so one could not tell for certain, but judging by his bearing he gave the impression that he was young. In cold blood, he stood amidst the pawns, who circled around him, shouting in anger, raising their arms threateningly and raising their clubs.

One of the pawns tried to pounce on him, but before his stout, half-naked body could even touch the samurai's chest, he fell spectacularly on his head and ended up rolling and crawling on the ground. He was followed by another companion... And two others... And three others. The young samurai's graceful figure hurled them left and right through the air with maneuvers so fast that they were impossible to follow with your eyes. The pawns brandished their cudgels and charged at him.

But the samurai ducked his body, nimbly snatched a club from one of them, and began to beat the pawns relentlessly and strip them of their weapons.

From a secluded place a group of three or four men came running, wielding unsheathed swords, and surrounded the samurai. He shouted something at them. He took a step back, discarded the club, and expeditiously drew his *katana*.

The bare edge of his blade flashed a few times in the languid rays of the spring sun and sent the men's blades flying, and they knelt on the ground one after the other.

—That is the Shinto style!

—Who is this guy? He has incredible skill!

Umanosuke and Gyobu looked at one another.

Considering the consequences it might bring, the young samurai had used the back of his *katana*.

They both accurately captured the momentary flash of that blade and judged that his technique had reached a considerable level.

A samurai approached on horseback.

He should be the one supervising the work.

—Hey, we can't let this guy get away.

—Yes. Let's try to calm down.

Umanosuke and Gyobu ran down the plateau.

The young samurai was being interrogated by the samurai who had gotten off his horse and by other subordinate officials of his. The pawns were unanimously insulting and voicing their complaints to the officials. In an instant, Umanosuke made his way through the crowd and introduced himself.

—I know this man. I do not know what manner of misunderstanding has taken place, but I would like to settle it.

Simply by saying that he was a *hatamoto* who served the shogunate directly, the officials had already shown him their respect. Furthermore, they were familiar with the name Tada Umanosuke, from the Matsuoka *dojo*.

The altercation had originated from a trivial exchange of words between the grumpy pawns and the provincial samurai, unaware of the situation in Edo and the customs at a construction site. The officials reproved the pawns and entrusted the young samurai to Umanosuke.

—I am deeply grateful for your consideration, — the samurai apologized to Umanosuke after he left that place.

Both Umanosuke and Gyobu were amazed at the youth and the exalted physical attractiveness of that samurai.

—Observing that you were a Shinto practitioner like us, I decided to mediate between the two parties.

—I decided to mediate between the two sides. A quarrel with officials always leads to trouble, so you got me out of a tight spot. As you've guessed, I'm a Shinto, but I studied in the Ippa faction. My name is Mizutani Yatsuya Mitsunobu.

—Mizutani Yatsuya? Aren't you Hijiko's disciple? — Gyobu remembered the name.

—Precisely, — Mizutani Yatsuya.

—I have heard of you, who, despite your youth, are already a swordsman like no other. Indeed, your blows with the back of your sword a short while ago were masterful.

—I thought that it would be childish to take on simple workers in earnest, — laughed Yatsuya placidly with a composure that was surprising for someone of his age, — Forgive the impertinence, but earlier you introduced yourselves as Tada, a disciple of master Matsuoka...

—Exactly, and this here is my partner Kabuto Gyobu.

—In that case, I've known the reputation of both of you for a long time, and I'm immensely happy to have been able to meet you both at the same time in such an unexpected way.

Their treatment was always impeccable and friendly.

—I have just arrived in Edo today, and being a provincial person I have made a shameful blunder.

—Well, then you still won't have anywhere to stay...

—No.

—Then you should come to the Matsuoka *dojo*, — Gyobu invited him. In those days, if one met an exceptional swordsman, the custom was to invite him to stay at his *dojo* to exchange teachings of the sword styles. Even more understandable was Gyobu's invitation after he learned that it was Mizutani, a swordsman of the same school as himself and whom he had already heard of. Yatsuya accepted his hospitality.

At the Matsuoka mansion, when Ayume and Yatsuya met, the two of them let out shouts of astonishment, sharp and piercing, though provoked in each case by completely opposite motives.

—So you were here? Miss Kayo told me only that you had gone to Edo, so I thought about where you might be — and, indeed, on second thought it was only natural that if you had come to Edo you should be here.

Because of that unexpected encounter, Yatsuya's cheeks had blushed and taken on a beautiful colour.

He had learned of Ayume's sudden departure several days after it occurred. He had coerced Kayo into telling him where she had gone and, after learning that her destination was Edo, he began to burn with a flare of envy as he surmised that she had likely run off to Edo because she had agreed in advance to meet Shintaro there, and now the two of them would be enjoying life.

He convinced his master Hijiko Doronosuke that, before he left for Sunpu as a representative of the Shinto style, he had some business to attend to in Edo, but in reality his primary goal upon arrival in Edo was to find Ayume no matter what. And he was fortunate enough to be able to meet the person in question face to face on the very day he had set foot in Edo.

"This is a good omen", said Yatsuya to himself, and a smile spontaneously spread across his cheeks.

—Did you already know Ayume? — asked Gyobu in surprise. At that moment he felt for the first time a vague sense of unease at having brought that handsome swordsman into the *dojo*.

—Yes, I know her very well, from Kashima.

At the boldness with which Yatsuya spoke, Ayume corrected him immediately, frowning slightly:

—No, we only met a couple of times on the day of that tournament. From our first meeting, I felt rejection towards him. And after the insistent courtship that followed, he got it even more repellent.

—I suppose Ayume has come in search of Shintaro. Have you achieved your purpose? — Yatsuya asked, apparently somewhat uncomfortably.

—I have not yet been able to see him. Do you have any idea of his whereabouts? — Ayume asked, now in a slightly kinder voice, as if clutching at a burning nail.

—I have no particular clue about that, but if he is in Edo, I suppose he is easier to find than you imagine.

—What? Do you really think so?

—That's right. Apart from this house, Shintaro doesn't have any special contacts here in Edo, does he?

—No, I don't think so...

—In that case, shouldn't you look into the travelers' hostels in Bakurocho or Kodenmacho? I don't know the city of Edo very well, but from what I've heard, people who come to Edo from the provinces usually first look for accommodation in such hostels. That was also my intention, but I abused Kabuto's kindness by coming here...

Gyobu and Umanosuke listened to him with long faces. Of course, being both residents of Edo, they knew about those hostels but they felt that if they went through Bakurocho or Kodenmacho they could find Shintaro right away, so they didn't even try to go there.

Without any sign of realizing the feelings of those two, Ayume focused all her attention on the hopeful words of Yatsuya.

—Tomorrow I will go and search him there. Kabuto, please come with me.

—Do not bother, I will go and find him, — Yatsuya announced sharply with a purpose in mind, — I too must see Shintaro to discuss a matter with him. I assure you that I will find him tomorrow and bring him here.

IV

All the guests were in their rooms, each trying to make their intentions go unnoticed: the *ronin* who had come to the capital in search of a lord to serve; the merchant who was plotting to make a profit; a large peasant family from a nearby village prepared to stay there for a long time because of some judicial process; a wanderer of unknown lineage; the ascetic who was on a pilgrimage; the tax collector; a fraudulent doctor who had run

away in the middle of the night; a Shinto priest expelled for womanizing, and so on.

Unfortunately it had been raining since morning, the street was muddy and unusually cold for the season, so the vast majority of the guests had lost their desire to go outside.

A young samurai with a beautiful face walked through the row of Kodenmachi's hostels and conscientiously entered each one to ask questions. Obviously, it was Mizutani Yatsuya.

—Is there a man here called Urabe Shintaro from Hitachi?

This was already the tenth inn where he had asked the same question, but this time Yatsuya's voice reached a nearby room where Shintaro lay, and he rose abruptly to his feet. As he had registered under a false name, he heard the innkeeper's sharp denial:

—That person is not staying here.

Mizutani Yatsuya. It was not someone he wanted to meet. First of all he hated it because it seemed that he had in his hands the dark secret of his father. Moreover, Yatsuya had broken his promise: he had defeated Rokuzaemon and had qualified as a representative of the Shinto style. Depending on how one looked at it, it might seem that he had abandoned the tournament himself after falling into its trap. After thinking about this, Shintaro hoped that Yatsuya would leave.

Suddenly, however, a question arose: why had Yatsuya gone to find him in the rain? Did Yatsuya not have a reason for not wanting to meet Shintaro again? Perhaps something out of the ordinary had happened to Ayume? He had resigned himself to giving up Ayume, but as soon as he thought something might have happened to him, the blood of his entire body boiled. As if by reflex, he jumped to his feet and ran in the rain. Yatsuya was leaving the adjoining inn.

—Mizutani...

—Oh, Urabe! How lucky I am to have found you! — Yatsuya smiled openly, — I thought I might find you here, so I came looking for you...

—Is this some urgent matter?

—No... — to protect himself from the rain, Yatsuya took shelter under the eaves of the inn, — It's not a matter of a hurry, but... A few days ago in Kashima I made you a promise: that on another occasion we would face each other to obtain the qualification of Shinto Style representative. I want to keep that promise.

Shintaro's eyes got slightly red at the edge. He was embarrassed that he had misunderstood Yatsuya's intentions.

—My intention was to draw with Kouda Rokuzaemon in the duel, but I ended up winning by accident. I do not consider myself the representative of the Shinto style for that, however, as I have yet to face you.

—My deepest thanks for your consideration. By now I was indifferent that you would address Sunpu as a representative of the Shinto style, but I would be pleased to face you in a duel.

—I am of the same opinion. I was planning to ask master Matsuoka to referee. What do you think?

—Do you know master Matsuoka?

—Since yesterday... — Yatsuya replied, and fixed his attentive gaze on Shintaro's face, — Master Matsuoka's home has received an unexpected visit.

—Huh? Who is it?

—Ayume.

—Oh!

—Why didn't you go to visit master Matsuoka earlier? Ayume is there waiting anxiously for you. I also had the matter of my promise, but when Ayume asked me, I came here to look for you.

—Mizutani, I ask you to please forgive me.

Shintaro bowed his head submissively. The determination to never see Ayume again, made when she left Kashima out of the scruples of young hearts, was almost gone.

—Urabe, prepare yourself and we will go to master Matsuoka's house together.

As Yatsuya and Shintaro hurried from Kodenmacho to the entrance to Kojimachi, in the Matsuoka *dojo*, Kabuto Gyobu and Tada Umanosuke were gathered in a room with a gloomy look. Gyobu had not been able to sleep a wink all night in his own room near the *dojo*.

At the thought that Shintaro would appear the next day and Ayume would throw herself into his arms, a pain ran through his chest as if it were being burned by a few coals. Imagining the sleeping silhouette of Ayume, who was sleeping soundly less than four meters from his room, he felt an insane, one might say diabolical, urge to go there immediately, pounce on it and hold it so tightly that it would break her bones.

"Ayume, Ayume... why did you have to become so beautiful", groaned Gyobu in torment, suffering and clenching his teeth.

At dawn, he finally made a resolution: he would dare to express his feelings to Ayume. However, he had made a promise to Umanosuke: that if they competed for Ayume, they would do so fairly.

When he found himself pondering whether he should wait to tell Umanosuke of his decision before carrying it out, Umanosuke himself entered the room.

Umanosuke had not been able to sleep a wink the night before too, in his home in Banshu-cho. The expression on his face showed the same dismay as Gyobu's, or perhaps even greater consternation, for unlike Gyobu, Umanosuke's feelings for Ayume could be said to be a kind of "extremely late first love". After an agonizing night, he too had decided to confess his feelings to Ayume before Yatsuya returned with Shintaro.

When he came face to face with Gyobu, Umanosuke broke off the ice:

—Is Mizutani out looking for you yet?

—Yes.

—So today Shintaro will show up here...

—I think so.

—I... I've made a decision.

—Me too...

—I'm going to be honest with Ayume.

—I'm going to be honest with Ayume.

They both said the same thing, looked at each other and smiled.

—And what do we do if Ayume chooses Shintaro? — Gyobu asked.

Umanosuke twisted his face bitterly and remained silent.

—Will we give up then? — insisted Gyobu.

—Giving up... Is impossible for me, — Umanosuke replied.

—Same for me.

—So what do we do?

—Whoever gets Ayume must also become the successor to master Bokuden and the representative of the Shinto. Therefore, there is no choice but to face Shintaro to show who's better with the sword and persuade Ayume.

—You're right. Let's compete between Shintaro, you and I, and add Mizutani Yatsuya too, to determine who is a true representative of Shinto style.

Finally, Kabuto Gyobu and Tada Umanosuke — known as the two dragons of the Matsuoka *dojo* — came to such a conclusion not for the honor of the school, but for a matter of love.

—But it will be difficult to convince Ayume to accept these conditions.

—That's right. That's the problem.

That's why they crossed their arms with gloomy faces and remained silent.

They remained like that for a long time, until they heard Yatsuya's voice in the hall on his return.

Both of them uttered an exclamation and by the time they started to get up, Ayume had already run out of her room as soon as they heard:

—Shintaro!

—Ayume!

The voices of both resounded in unison with such intensity as to tear each other apart. The tone of those near-shrieking exclamations indicated, more eloquently than anything else, that these two people were bound together by a bond so strong that nothing and no one could separate them.

As if they had been speared through the chest, Umanosuke and Gyobu knelt again in surrender and bowed their heads to the chest as if to observe the wound that had opened.

Yatsuya stood indifferently by the side near Shintaro and Ayume as the two of them embraced and caught up on what had happened since their parting. If someone had been watching the depths of those dark, shadowy pupils carefully and silently, however, they would have seen the flames of envy and fury glow lividly in them, like the tongue of a snake.

V

It had already been decided at the tournament held at the Kashima shrine that it would be Mizutani Yatsuya who would have to come to Suruga as a swordsman representing the Shinto style.

—We don't intend to make any objections to that, but being responsible for the Matsuoka *dojo* and the Shinto style in Edo, we would like to be able to take on Mizutani. We would also like Urabe to join us, as he refrained from participating in the Kashima tournament on that occasion.

Yatsuya accepted the proposal of Kabuto Gyobu and Tada Umanosuke with extreme indifference. Shintaro did not object either.

Matsuoka Sadayu Noritsugu, despite his delicate health, agreed to act as the referee to determine which of the four was the winner.

It was established that on the first day the pairings would be:

Kabuto Gyobu against Mizutani Yatsuya, and Tada Umanosuke against Urabe Shintaro.

And on the second day the winners of each pair would compete against each other.

On the first day, there were only five people in the *dojo*: the four swordsmen and master Matsuoka Sadayu. In another room, Ayume prayed for Shintaro's victory while her heart was pounding.

In the duel between Gyobu and Yatsuya there were constant unexpected twists and turns that forced the spectators to hold their breath until the end. One of the two opponents was an imposing, majestic man in his thirties; the other was a handsome, inexperienced young man. The impression they conveyed was just as if an intrepid, fierce tiger and a nimble panther, showing their fangs and with their eyes wide open, were preparing to pounce on each other.

Knowing the technique that Yatsuya used against the pawns of the public works on the Suruga Plateau, Gyobu thought that prolonging the fight too long would be a disadvantage to him.

The result would be that he would end up being completely at the mercy of Yatsuya until all his energy was consumed. The duel had to be decided in one fell swoop.

With a cry so sharp that it seemed even brutal, Gyobu deployed his impressive offensive tactics. Despite wielding wooden swords, in the hands of these two experts, these weapons had the same power as if they were made of steel. Should they strike the body of the opponent with them, the opponent would not only be injured, but could even lose his life.

Observing the excessive violence of Gyobu's attack, Sadayu frowned. In duels with wooden swords, it is normal not to actually strike the opponent's body with the sword, but to stop it just before it touches the target: victory will be recognized and the duel declared over. However, it was obvious that Gyobu's handling of the sword did not respect that convention, and that his purpose was to hit Yatsuya all over his body. Through skillful footwork and the movements of his sword, Yatsuya dodged and repelled the attacks of Gyobu's wooden sword, which descended and fiercely attacked all parts of his body: head, neck, shoulders, chest, forearm...

As Gyobu feared, it seemed that Yatsuya's intention was to extend the fight. Jumping, jumping, and running through the *dojo* in all directions to get out of Gyobu's pursuit, moving his body at a frenetic pace, it was unusual for a duel between two such outstanding fellow swordsmen to take this form. However, when Gyobu began to show impatience and anger at Yatsuya's passive attitude, he began to adopt a fierce counterattacking attitude.

"On the last attack, hit him with the sword guard", his master Hijiko Doronosuke had instructed him.

Yatsuya lunged at his opponent's chest as if to strike him with his own body, and the blow that killed him decided the match. The wooden sword

with which Gyobu stopped the blow broke in two and flew away. The next moment Yatsuya's wooden sword was striking Gyobu in the neck.

—End of the fight! — proclaimed Sadayu, visibly downcast.

Compared with the first duel, the second duel between Shintaro and Umanosuke was resolved too easily.

Shintaro faced Umanosuke with the wooden sword in his right hand, the tip pointing diagonally downward to the left, and as soon as he took this position he began to easily shorten the distance between him and his opponent, which was about seven meters.

Umanosuke was taken aback by the overly careless appearance of this attack. He impetuously raised the blade that was originally aimed at his opponent's eyes and then lowered it straight down.

The blade of Shintaro rose like a spring with tremendous vigor in an upward movement to the left and stopped Umanosuke's blade. Shintaro then brought the blade down from Umanosuke's head to below his obi and struck him in the lower abdomen. If Umanosuke moved at all, it would be enough to give him a single blow to end the fight.

—I lost! — Umanosuke announced before Sadayu gave his verdict, and bowed his head.

Sadayu's face showed a sorrowful expression. His two disciples known as the two dragons had been completely defeated by two young swordsmen from the provinces who had just arrived in the capital.

"No, it is not only the two of them. Even if I were in good health myself, I would be no match for them either. After all, the Edo Shinto style is no match for the original Kashima", Sadayu considered, and again felt embarrassed. However, within the same Shinto style there were experts as impressive as these. And yet their names are not known in Edo. If these young men were to make their way gracefully, the Shinto style could cease to be subjugated to the Yagyu and Ono factions and live out their days of glory again.

Thinking about it, he felt that it was better to rejoice for the sake of the school and put aside trivial emotions.

Shelving these mixed feelings, Sadayu proclaimed the conclusion of the duel and announced the schedule for the next day.

But the one who suffered the greatest shock in the duel that day was precisely Yatsuya. The fight against Gyobu had been narrowly won.

However, he had been shocked to witness the duel between Shintaro and Umanosuke.

"If I were to face Shintaro, I would lose everything", he had to admit to himself.

He felt that it would be necessary to completely change the plan he had been devising in his mind up to that point. Already he found it difficult to understand what the initial plan had been and how its modification had taken place within his cunning and ingenious head, but in the evening of that same day he tempted Kabuto Gyobu.

He led him through the muddy streets after the rain to the nearby Josen temple compound and sat on the steps of the main building.

—Mizutani, I admit my defeat to your excellent technique. It's an impressive thing for someone so young... — Gyobu honestly praised the skill of his companion, as if he had forgotten the hostility that poured out during the duel.

—No, I was simply lucky, — for a moment Yatsuya was humble, but suddenly he made a strange comment, — I must apologize to you.

—What?

—For bringing Urabe into the Matsuoka *dojo*.

—And why should you apologize for that?

—When Ayume asked me, I innocently went out looking for him, but now I regret that I didn't think about it a little bit.

—Why?

—Please forgive me if I'm mistaken, but I think that you also have feelings for Ayume.

—Yes, — Gyobu muttered somewhat flushed and with an apparently irritated tone.

—Then I did something totally out of line.

—If tomorrow Urabe will be defeated, then Ayume would be yours for sure.

—I don't feel anything special about Ayume. Even in in case I won, I'm don't know what to do with the lady Ayume.

—Mizutani, is this true? — Gyobu now thought it was incredible that even if his companion had the unique opportunity to get a woman of Ayume's stature, he didn't feel any desire for her.

—I'm telling you the truth. I am already engaged to another woman. If I wasn't, I'd probably have fallen in love with Ayume too, since it's clear that she's a woman of impressive beauty.

"Exactly... Ayume is impressive, an absolutely impressive beauty. To think of Ayume becoming someone else's wife...", moaned a voice bitterly in Gyobu's chest.

Yatsuya looked sideways at Gyobu, who turned his dejected gaze to the ground with a deeply frowned face, and proceeded to pour poison into his ears little by little.

—Even in Edo there is no woman as beautiful as Ayume. If I didn't already have a fiancée, I would surely have fallen in love with her and made her mine.

—But Ayume is in love with Shintaro.

—That's not an obstacle. When I want something, I do whatever it takes to get it.

Since Yatsuya had pronounced with special emphasis "I do whatever it takes", Gyobu looked up in surprise. And then Yatsuya said something unexpected to him:

—Especially about Urabe... A despicable man who is not worthy of Ayume.

—What?! Shintaro, a despicable man? What do you mean by that? — Gyobu retorted, obviously surprised, for those were words that a samurai should not use lightly.

—To win the tournament in Kashima, that man colluded with his father Urabe Haruie and murdered the three leading candidates for victory: Hinatsu Kizaemon, Iizasa Shurinosuke and Kashiwabara Shinobee.

—Mizutani, there are things one can say, and others that should never come out of one's mouth. I too know Urabe Haruie, and he is an admirable man. It is impossible that he has committed such nonsense.

—No matter how admirable a person is, sometimes he is blinded by his love for his son.

—Do you have proof of what you are claiming?

—I do. Of course I do. Shintaro himself abandoned the tournament and fled because I showed him the *inro* I had obtained as evidence. I promised him that I would not tell anyone else. But I have thought that I cannot allow a man like you, who has such an honest heart, to lose his beautiful beloved to that wretched man.

VI

Because of his feverish love, in Gyobu's mind everything irrational was rationalized, and everything impossible became possible.

That is why he gave his approval to a fearsome and perverse thought that, had it occurred to him just a day earlier, he would surely have been horrified and despised himself at the very thought.

"I'm going to kill Shintaro."

He justified this plan to himself by arguing that he was doing it in the name of justice. It was said:

"I cannot allow the innocent Ayume to fall into the hands of a man so base that he premeditatedly kills his competitors with the help of his father. In the name of the gods, I will execute Shintaro myself."

This was not only the result of Yatsuya's poisonous words running through his body all night.

The primary cause that forced such a decision was the fact that Shintaro was staying at the Matsuoka *dojo*. As the *dojo* was quite small, Yatsuya had to move to Tada's residence for Shintaro to spend the night.

Naturally, they slept in separate bedrooms, but Gyobu could hear Shintaro's voice talking to Ayume in her room until late at night, which made him intensely jealous. He interpreted that vengeful feeling born of envy as the indignation of justice.

The next morning, when Shintaro was quietly preparing for the duel against Yatsuya that afternoon, Gyobu approached him and said that there was something confidential he wanted to talk to him about and invited him out.

He took him to the Josen temple compound, where he had been talking to Yatsuya the day before. Gyobu was going to the left of Shintaro. As soon as he saw that Shintaro's shoulder was half a step ahead, Gyobu drew his weapon and tried to attack him in one move. It was the ideal position for Gyobu's skill: it was clearly a blow that would cause the certain death of his opponent.

If he missed at the last moment, however, it was not so much because Shintaro turned away instantly, but rather because Gyobu's feet slipped across the still-wet ground. The next moment Shintaro drew his blade as well.

—Kabuto, what is the meaning of this? — Shintaro questioned him, more surprised than outraged at such unexpected behavior.

—Shintaro, you are a disgrace to the Shinto style. You must die!

Having missed his first attack, which he intended to be his last as well, Gyobu was impatient and unbridled.

—What do you mean by those words?

—You should take your hand to your chest and think about it, you coward!

—What?!

—What did you do at the tournament in Kashima? By now it is well known that you planned with your father Haruie to murder the other competitors.

—Do you have any proof? — Shintaro called out, but his expression broke.

In fact, the *inro* of his father that had appeared at the scene of one of the murders was in Shintaro's possession.

Either Yatsuya had revealed it to him, or some vague rumor had reached him. Either way, Shintaro was not in a position to reply that it was entirely unfounded. However, Gyobu perceived this hesitation on the part of Shintaro as an acknowledgement of the facts.

—For the honor of Shinto style, die! — he proclaimed, and set out to attack him.

Almost by reflex, Shintaro stopped the sword strike and took a step back.

—Wait, Kabuto. My father... My father would never do something like that. It's all a mistake.

—Huh? Bastard, at this point there are no excuses anymore!

—It's all a lie. I'll show you proof of innocence from my father. Please wait, Kabuto.

But Gyobu no longer paid any attention to Shintaro's words. At that point, the question for him was no longer whether Shintaro and Haruie had actually committed those crimes. His only feeling at the time was that the young man before his eyes was an enemy he must hate as he was about to take Ayume from him.

—Die! Die! — he grunted, and then a second and third attack followed.

What saved Shintaro was that he was still quite calm. He was retreating as he deftly slipped away from Gyobu's sword, which rushed at him like the waves of a raging sea, but he was cornered against the temple steps and his opponent was preparing to launch a final and definitive attack on him.

Then Shintaro's sword flew to the left and, with a horizontal cut that turned the tide and allowed him to flee from the clutches of death, gave Gyobu a clean cut on the left side of his torso.

—Ah... Ah... — Gyobu collapsed forward.

—Damn it! — whispered Shintaro as he watched him fall. He bit his lower lip so hard that he even bled and stood there petrified and stunned.

At the exact same time, Tada Umanosuke had been summoned to Councilor Doi Toshikatsu's mansion. It was unprecedented for a low-ranking *hatamoto* to be summoned personally by Doi Toshikatsu.

Umanosuke waited uneasily and wondering why, in a room at Doi's mansion, for the lord of the house to appear.

At last Doi appeared, who was then approaching sixty years of age. His sideburns were completely white, and his face was deeply furrowed with a tremendously thoughtful expression. For a time he stared at Umanosuke's back, prostrate before him, until finally he said:

—Umanosuke, you may raise your head.

—Yes?

—Actually, I had thought about bringing Matsuoka here, but he's been sick and bedridden lately.

—That's right. Because of his advanced age, he's not showing much improvement...

—Mmm... Mmm... — Doi shook his head several times, as older people usually do when they're convinced of something, — Since this is a matter of Shinto style, even if I cannot talk to Sadayu, it is good enough for me to talk to you.

—About the Shinto style, you say?

—In the time of his predecessor Matsuoka Hyogonosuke, Shinto was one of the styles in which the *shogun* was instructed. But since Sadayu, things have not been going well.

—You are absolutely right.

—So we want to give the Shinto style a chance to make its mark.

—That's something that would fill us with joy and gratitude.

—Wait, wait. You won't know if you have to be grateful or not until you hear what I have to say. Ha, ha, ha. This is a very important mission.

—I understand.

—You've heard about the matter of Suruga's great advisor, I suppose...

Umanosuke had also heard rumors of the great advisor Tadanaga that he held a grudge against the *shogun* Iemitsu, and that the goal of assassinating him was hiring *ronin*, stockpiling weapons, and maintaining fluid relations with the disgruntled *daimyo*. Doi continued:

—What I want is for you to go to Suruga to infiltrate as a spy.

—As a spy!

—That's right. The great advisor sends emissaries everywhere in search of skilled *ronin*. In response to that request, you will go to Suruga and keep us informed of the situation inside the castle. What do you think? An important mission, eh? In return, if you are successful, we will make Shinto style flourish again.

A succession of images began spinning in Umanosuke's head as if a spinning lamp were projecting them: Suruga... The representative of the Shinto style, Mizutani Yatsuya... His challenger, Urabe Shintaro... Ayume... And finally, himself.

Due to the totally unforeseen nature of this new mission that was entrusted to him, he was unable to judge at that time what the relationship between that mission and his current circumstances was.

—So what? Will you do it? — urged Doi, tapping on the little tobacco tray.

It was not a matter that could be dismissed simply by saying that one did not feel like it, for it was the command of a superior.

—I accept your assignment, — it was the only thing Umanosuke could answer at the time.

EVENTS OF SUNPU

I

Excluding the departure (Edo) and arrival (Kyoto) stations, of the fifty-three stations along the Tokaido route the most prominent was, of course, Fuchu (Sunpu) in Suruga province.

But the importance of this Fuchu station was not because the *daimyo* who went up or down the Tokaido route held it in special esteem. The reason was the presence of the great advisor and lord of Sunpu castle himself, Tokugawa Tadanaga.

As the younger brother of the current *shogun* Iemitsu and as the favorite son of the former *shogun* Hidetada, and above all as a subversive rebel with insurrectionary ambitions, the very presence of Tadanaga was in some ways unsettling but at the same time, there was something about him that made him trustworthy.

Both on their way to and from Edo, all of the *daimyo* without exception visited Sunpu Castle to present their respect to Tadanaga. Surely some of them lucidly encouraged Tadanaga's ambitions, or else followed his lead. And in the city at the foot of the castle, numerous *ronin* from all over the provinces would gather. For that multitudinous mass of samurai who had been left without a lord to serve, which had increased dramatically since the armistice of the Genna³³ era, Tadanaga was seen as a savior who provided them with a second chance to prosper. They nicknamed Tadanaga "the ferocious tiger on the loose in the Tokai region", or "the dragon crouching at the foot of Mount Fuji".

As for the Edo shogunate, he was seen as the only person with enough courage and ability to carry out their plans for rebellion.

Especially when Tadanaga himself declared:

—The samurai who excels in a certain skill, what he aspires to — is to spread that skill throughout the country.

The retired *shogun* Hidetada was ill and confined to his bed in the west wing of Edo Castle. When the inevitable happened to Hidetada, would he let that opportunity slip away?

The crouching dragon would summon the clouds, the fierce tiger would roar in the wind and cause a spectacular commotion. Such expectation filled the *ronin* with hope, so they continued to arrive at the castle city of Sunpu day in and day out.

³³ A period of peace and stability for the Tokugawa shogunate after the fall of Osaka Castle in 1615.

It was against this backdrop that they appeared, one after another, in the city of Sunpu — Urabe Shintaro, Tada Umanosuke, and Mizutani Yatsuya. The first to arrive was Shintaro.

Having killed Kabuto Gyobu as a result of an unexpected challenge, he decided that he must leave Edo.

The thought that his father's secret had already spread among the disciples of Matsuoka made him unwilling to show his face in the *dojo* again.

Moreover, he could no longer remain in Edo after he had murdered Kabuto Gyobu, the precious disciple of Matsuoka Sadayu, with his own hands.

From there he returned to the Kodenmacho inn, wrote a letter to Mizutani Yatsuya and had it delivered to him at the Matsuoka *dojo*. The contents of the letter were as follows:

"Due to unexpected circumstances, I ended up killing Kabuto Gyobu, and for that reason I will not return to the *dojo*. I guess you'll be heading to Sunpu sooner or later.

In the hope that I will be able to perform the duel I promised you, I will go ahead of you to that place and await the day we meet there again."

Yatsuya showed the letter to Ayume and Umanosuke, feigning surprise.

—But what could have led Shintaro to kill Kabuto? I can't believe it, — Ayume insisted, stunned by an unusual and inconceivable event, but when they brought Gyobu's body back, her doubts were mercilessly dispelled. Ayume retreated to a room and began to cry. The tears she shed were due not so much to sadness over Gyobu's death as to the misery of being separated from Shintaro again now that she had finally found him.

Meanwhile, Umanosuke stood before the remains of Gyobu along with Yatsuya, seeming to be meditating on something deep. At last he opened his mouth and said solemnly:

—I cannot stand by and watch my dear friend die. I will go to Sunpu and kill Shintaro.

In this way, Umanosuke took the opportunity to address Sunpu, cleverly using the death of Gyobu as a pretext. Ever since Doi Toshikatsu had ordered him to move to Sunpu as a spy, he had been pondering what motives he could cite before others. So Gyobu's death had provided him with the perfect excuse.

Of his two competitors in the love arena, Gyobu had died and Shintaro had left for Sunpu, so he could leave without worrying about leaving Ayume alone in Edo. Moreover, according to his own projections, if he returned after properly performing his spy duties, his conditions for marrying Ayume would have improved as well.

Yatsuya nodded.

—It is a most understandable wish. Obviously, that is what you should do. But it would not be wise to inform Ayume of this. I think it would be best if you left secretly.

—Of course, that's my intention. It was clear that if I told Ayume that I was going to kill Shintaro, she would hold a grudge and stop me. The best thing was to do it all in secret.

—I'm going to Sunpu in a couple of days, too. The two of us will go to Sunpu in search of Urabe: me to fight a duel with him, and you to take revenge on him. Ha, ha. What a strange situation we've come to! — Yatsuya commented casually, hiding his true intentions behind his beautiful white smile.

The next day, Yatsuya turned to Ayume and said shamelessly:

—Have you heard, Ayume? To avenge Kabuto's death, Tada has left for Sunpu to search for Urabe.

—What?

Seeing Ayume's surprise, Yatsuya went on without wasting a minute:

—I tried hard to stop him, but he wouldn't listen. Only you could make him abandon his plans.

—Me? What could I do?

—You have to go to Sunpu. There's no other choice.

—In that case I'll go, I'll come right away.

—I too will leave for Sunpu tomorrow. If you don't mind, we could travel together.

He was not the most desirable companion, but being a distant place where he knew no one, it was better to travel with someone like him. So Ayume agreed to travel with Yatsuya.

She had all reasons to regret it from the first day they left Edo, however. At a hostel in Kanagawa, Yatsuya tried to force him on Ayume.

—No, Mizutani! — Ayume shrank and turned away from him, but Yatsuya came back to her.

—Why not? As the winner of the tournament held in Kashima, I have every right to become your husband and to be the successor to the Bokuden style.

—In that regard, Urabe has already received a strong approval.

—You don't really know Shintaro. He's not the admirable man you imagine. Why did he quit the tournament and disappear from Kashima? Do you know the reasons?

—It was due to certain circumstances, things about men that a woman cannot understand. I trust Shintaro.

—Well, since we've come to this point, I'll tell you. The reason is that

Shintaro colluded with his father, lord Haruie, to murder Hinatsu, Iizasa and Kashiwabara.

—Mizutani, please don't say any more nonsense. Both his father and Lord Shintaro are incapable of the infamies you suggest.

—I have irrefutable evidence to prove it. Shintaro also murdered Kabuto because he held it against him.

—It's a lie! It's all a lie! That's impossible!

His arguments were useless. Even if they showed her obvious evidence, the heart of the young woman, who trusted the man she loved blindly, would not waver in the slightest.

From the beginning she refused to accept the words of Yatsuya, of whom she had long held an unfavourable opinion.

Thinking that if words were not enough to bring her to her senses then he would try by force, Yatsuya tried to pounce on her again, but then Ayume reached for a dagger.

—As long as I live, I belong to no one but Shintaro.

In those eyes that glared at him there was a vivid expression of resignation in the face of death.

"If I continue to force her, this woman will do a suicide", Yatsuya reflected, and from then on he renounced the use of violence again.

—Why do you hold Shintaro in such high regard? — Yatsuya muttered irritably, twisting his beautiful face with an expression that mixed resentment and envy.

—I think of Shintaro as if he was the only gentleman in the world.

Yatsuya had his teeth ground at Ayume's beauty in making such a passionate statement.

"I'm going to kill that damned Shintaro."

At the inns of Hiratsuka and Odawara he had the woman he burned for before his eyes, but he could not even touch her. So Yatsuya entered the city of Sunpu castle, relishing the taste of humiliation for the first time in his life.

II

Yatsuya ended his journey at the home of Iimura Sakuzaemon, a provincial samurai from Josei who had been introduced to him earlier by his master Hijiko Doronosuke.

The residence in Iimura was quite far from the Denmacho area, where many travelers' hostels were concentrated. Also, because she had been on

constant alert during the trip and had barely slept, Ayume had begun to feel unwell and was in bed as soon as she arrived.

"Perfect, this way she will not be able to go out on her own in search of Shintaro", Yatsuya thought, but just in case he asked Sakuzaemon to not allow Ayume to leave the house under any circumstances during his absence, and left for the castle to pay a visit to the advisor Saegusa Izunokami.

When he handed him the letter from Yoshikawa Koremasa, the high priest of the Kashima shrine, recommending him as the official representative of the Shinto style and the most outstanding swordsman of the entire school, Saegusa told him:

—Ah, you also bring a notice from Kashima. I really figured you'd be quite a big man, but it turns out you're an unusual and extremely beautiful youngling. Ha, ha, ha! If it were just a matter of being hired to serve in this fiefdom, with a letter of recommendation as impressive as this one there should be no problem. I will immediately go and tell my lord. However...

—Saegusa rolled up his eyes and looked at Yatsuya.

—Huh?

—Urabe Shintaro, I think he said... Bokuden style, from... Shinto style. Do you know it?

—Yes, we know each other.

—Well, that Urabe guy came and asked us if we were going to give that Shinto representative a new position, so I decided to let him face such representative first.

—The Urabe in question is a man who ran away from the tournament in Kashima because he was afraid of me.

—Well, a person who ran away because he was afraid of you, and now here he comes... It's a little strange, don't you think?

—You're right. However, if he wants to, I don't refuse.

—Ah, really? In that case, the best thing would be for you to face that man in a duel with *katanas*. What do you think?

—I think it's perfect, — Yatsuya replied, hiding his anxiety.

—On the twenty-fourth of September a duel-to-the-death tournament will be held inside this very castle in the presence of the feudal lord. I will add to the program the confrontation between you and Urabe as the last duel. We will leave the official recruitment for after that fight.

—All right.

—As a recommended representative of the Shinto style, I'm sure you won't screw up, but this Urabe guy is pretty good.

—Has he ever faced anyone from this fiefdom?

—No, he hasn't fought anyone, but he still showed us his great skills.

As Saegusa recounted, when Shintaro came to ask him for a duel with Yatsuya, Saegusa interrogated him with a slightly sarcastic smile on his lips:

—Do you think that you can beat Mizutani in a duel?

Saegusa's smile was due to the fact that Shintaro seemed too young for him, and he also imagined that his opponent Mizutani Yatsuya, the swordsman chosen to represent him, would be an intrepid big man. Then Shintaro looked up at Saegusa and said:

—First of all...

With those words he bowed his head and quickly retreated just a couple of yards and smiled.

Confused, Saegusa looked at him and then Shintaro pointed:

—Your armrest...

—What?

When he unconsciously pressed on the armrest on which his right elbow was slightly resting, the armrest shook and collapsed, causing Saegusa's upper body to fall forward as well. The front leg of the armrest had been cleanly cut diagonally and split from the rest of the tool.

—I beg your pardon for my rudeness, — Shintaro said as he returned back.

—Shusa, bring me the armrest from the other day, — ordered Saegusa.

Yatsuya examined the cut on the front leg of the armrest Saegusa had brought in. It was a smooth cut, as if the inner surface had been polished, caused by a sharp ray of silvery light, and was breathtaking.

"A clean cut", Yatsuya grunted from the bottom of his stomach, but at the same time a feeling of haughty refutation also came over him, "I am able to do it too".

—What do you think? Faced with a man who can complete such a quick manoeuvre before you even realise he has drawn his weapon, one cannot afford to be careless.

—I understand, — Yatsuya replied coldly and bowed, backing away without turning his back.

He stepped out of the room, but he had not walked four yards when a voice shouted from inside:

—He... He... He did it!

When the surprised attendants poked their heads out to see what was going on, they saw Saegusa with his eyes like plates and raising the new armrest in her hands, its front leg being cut off.

The piece of severed leg showed nearly the same angle of cut as the one Shintaro had cut off earlier, and it was rolling on the ground as if it were a twin of that one.

At the sound of Saegusa's screams behind his back, Yatsuya smiled but paid no attention to them, left Saegusa's residence and headed for the inn where the latter told him Shintaro was staying.

Fortunately, Shintaro was in his room.

— Urabe, I have been informed by Saegusa of your request. As he indicated, we will be facing each other on the twenty-fourth of September in a duel with real swords, in the presence of the feudal lord.

—A duel with real swords! — Shintaro was unexpectedly surprised.

—That's right. Isn't it more convenient that way? I have just given my consent. Do you have any objections?

Shintaro thought it sufficient only to determine which of us was superior, there was no reason to risk lives in a duel with real swords. However, if his opponent challenged him to a duel to the death, he could not refuse.

—Of course I have no objection.

—By the way, Urabe.

—Yes?

—Tada said he will avenge Kabuto's death and he's in Sunpu, too.

—Oh... What a setback. I don't feel like fighting Tada.

—Neither do I wish you to face another man before the day of our duel. I don't want you to suffer a single scratch until then.

—Please try to dissuade him.

—Well, that's going to be difficult, since he has a legitimate reason: to avenge his friend's death. I'm not going to do that. So, until the day of the duel, please keep away from the castle town so you don't run into him.

—I will, for there is no other choice.

—You can backtrack a little along the Tokaido Road to the village of Koyoshida, where there is a hostel called Inaba. I'll introduce you to the owner, so you can hide there.

After deciding on the plan to follow, Yatsuya said goodbye to Shintaro and from there immediately headed for Denmachi, where he visited the travelers' hostels until he located Umanosuke. Umanosuke had taken on the appearance of a *ronin*. It would likely be for the purpose of infiltrating the castle in search of useful contacts.

—Tada! — Yatsuya called.

—Oh! Well, I call myself Ishimura Saza here, if you don't mind...

—Ah, well, excuse me... Ishimura, have you discovered Urabe's whereabouts?

—No, it seems he's not in any of the hostels around here.

—Yes, that's right. He's staying at Ogicho.

—I see. So he's at Ogicho...

—But it's not advisable to go there right now. Tonight, at dog time (8 o'clock), he will move to Koyoshida. It would be best if you went ahead of him on that road and took revenge. It's a remote part of the castle town, where you will find no obstacles.

—I am deeply grateful for all the information you have given me.

—However, Tada... Well, I mean, Ishimura...

—Yes?

—Forgive my impertinence, but you know Urabe's skill. Unfortunately, neither Kabuto, nor I, nor you, can easily beat him by facing him fair and square.

Umanosuke had already been able to ensure that during the duel at the Matsuoka *dojo*. But he simply thought that the only thing to do was to face him by giving up everything, even at the risk of his life, for his honor as a swordsman.

—Winning or losing is a matter of luck.

—You are right. Maybe you'll win, maybe you'll lose. However, is it worth being defeated and losing your life for it?

—It's inevitable.

—That applies to you as an individual, but you must also have a mission. It would be all right if you only lost your life, but wouldn't the mission be unfinished?

—A mission? — Umanosuke was startled.

—Ha, ha, ha. You thought I did not know? Were you not once summoned to lord Doi Toshikatsu's mansion? Just after that you suddenly announced that you were leaving for Sunpu. Surely aside from revenge you must have a more important mission.

—What? — Umanosuke reached for the hilt of his *katana*. His expression altered, as he understood that he had no choice but to kill the one who had discovered his true identity as a spy.

—Please stop, — Yatsuya asked, holding his composure, — I have been given the same mission as you.

—Huh?

—It was not lord Doi who gave it to me, but Sakai, that's the only difference: we are on the same side.

—Really? — Umanosuke muttered as he unconsciously wiped the sweat from his forehead.

—I have already managed to get myself hired to serve the Suruga fief. When I start I will see what I can do to try to get you in as well. Let's cooperate with each other. I'll leave it in your hands. So you cannot give your life for Urabe's. You must take whatever measures are necessary to kill him, — whispered Yatsuya, emphasizing the part about "whatever measures are necessary".

A wicked joy glowed like mica in the depths of his black pupils.

III

That night, outside the city of Sunpu, blood was spilled to the east and west.

Shintaro headed toward the place in Koyoshida that Yatsuya had indicated, walking in the moonlight. The long road stretched before him into a pale stream of light.

The pines that grew on either side pierced the stream of moonlight and cast distinct black shadows.

His young soul was downcast. The issue of his father Haruie, which has become a great concern; Kabuto Gyobu, whom he had killed against unwillingly; his beloved Ayume, whom he had left behind in Edo when he came to Suruga; and Tada Umanosuke, who sought revenge upon him. All of these images swirled around his head and tormented him.

"After I finish the duel with real swords against Mizutani, I will have to do whatever I can to clear up the misunderstanding with Umanosuke, and then I will return to Edo to see Ayume. No, before that I have to go see my father to clear up these abominable suspicions. Actually, that's the first thing I should have done in the first place. There's no way my father could have done something so crazy."

He was ruminating on these things when, without realizing it, he had already reached the mound with the mile-long pole of Naganuma.

Suddenly a dark figure emerged from the space between the two houses and collided with Shintaro from behind as he passed by.

—Hey, what are you doing?

Dodging it by moving the body to the right, another man appeared in front, and then a third and a fourth man came and joined the fray.

—Stop, you idiots!

Shintaro kicked the man in front of him, grabbed those on his left and right

at the wrist, but when he knocked them together he felt the extraordinarily sharp presence of a sword in the back of his neck.

"What a mistake", he thought, and immediately turned his body over, but he had already received a cut on the right shoulder.

He grabbed his sword and stood up to the fearsome swordsman. Naturally, Shintaro had no way of knowing that the man hiding his face in a black mask was in fact Tada Umanosuke.

Despite that he had waited until the moment he was facing the other three men to attack him from behind, he sensed from the sharp edge of that blade that he would not be an easy opponent, so he focused all his senses on the edge of the blade.

Leaving aside the fact that there was a considerable disparity between the skill of one and the other, even in the case of two equal opponents, in such a situation, when attacked from behind without warning, there was no way to defend oneself.

If Umanosuke's blade was unable to inflict a deadly wound, however, it was not because he was inferior. What saved Shintaro's life were the pangs of conscience that remained in one corner of Umanosuke's heart. He could not eradicate the shame he himself felt for hiring those louts and perpetrating that vile attack by surprise.

"You have an important mission as a spy. You cannot throw away your life. To kill Shintaro, you must take whatever measures are necessary."

That was what Yatsuya had made him understand, and though he had decided to attack him cowardly in the dark, he finally, at the decisive moment, felt remorse of conscience. That was what unwittingly weakened his attack.

The goons he had hired ran as soon as they saw the glint of the two blades. Moonlight bathed their bodies as they faced each other in the middle of the road.

—Who are you? Identify yourself, coward! — Shintaro called out to him. He certainly was a coward. Now that he had committed this vile act and failed, he could in no way show his true identity. Umanosuke was stubbornly silent and waited for the chance to make a second attack that would cause a mortal wound to Shintaro.

Sensing that the skill of his anonymous assailant was even greater than he had imagined, Shintaro was also overcome by great despair. The bleeding due to the cut on his right shoulder from the first attack had spread and flowed down his back, and the intense pain in his right arm was spreading throughout his body.

"If I faced him without being hurt, maybe we'd end up even, but with this injury..."

He was aware that as he was retreating step by step, he was falling into the clutches of death. However, the teachings of the founder of his school, Bokuden, flashed in his mind: "A simultaneous sword strike; don't even reflect about it".

"That's it! I have to die at the same time as this guy."

His field of vision, which was beginning to be covered by a kind of black cloud, suddenly shone and from the tip of the sword a rainbow sprang up through the mist.

—Aaah!

This technique of a *Bokuden* style consisted of a life-threatening situation in which the sword was plunged into the opponent's bones, while wielder's bones collided with the opponent's blade.

He cut Umanosuke... And simultaneously the opponent cut him.

He received a blow to his left arm, but when he managed to regain his composure, his opponent had also suffered a serious cut to his left shoulder. In addition, the black cloth that hid his opponent's face had come off and fallen to the ground.

—Oh, Tada! — Shintaro hurriedly backed away as he staggered, — Stop it, Mr. Tada. I don't want to face you. I beg you to stop.

Umanosuke took his right, sword-holding hand to the wound on his left shoulder and twisted his face in an unpleasant manner. His lips shook with the physical pain and torment of his conscience.

—No, I refuse, I don't want to fight you! — Shintaro yelled like a maniac, turned and ran.

"I have to catch him and kill him", Umanosuke said to himself impatiently, but for some reason his legs were not moving, "I am a despicable man; I have committed an infamous act unbecoming a samurai".

Umanosuke stood motionless, as if petrified, watching Shintaro run away, on the verge of fainting from the two severe wounds he had sustained, blending in between the scenery woven by the pale moonlight and the dark shadows of the pines, until his silhouette was completely gone.

At the same time, to the west, on the outskirts of the castle city, in the house of Iimura where Yatsuya and Ayume were staying, a horrible event took place.

Yatsuya, quite drunk, showed up at nightfall in the room where Ayume was staying and told her off the cuff:

—Ayume, I have bad news.

Ayume had already gone to bed, but when she heard this she got up immediately and threw some clothes over herself.

—What is it?

—Tada has murdered Urabe.

—What?

—It was an instant death.

Ayume opened her already large eyes so wide that it seemed as if they were going to fall out of her orbit.

—That's a lie! It's impossible! There's no way that...

—It's the truth. I just saw it with my own eyes.

—Where? Tell me and I'll go there myself.

—It's not worth your while to go. As it happened in front of the main entrance to the castle, officers came at once and took care of Urabe's remains, and Tada was arrested on suspicion of being a spy. If you show up unwisely there, you will be implicated in the matter.

—I don't care, I'm going anyway.

Seeing that, if it was Shintaro, Ayume lost sight of the world and was capable of the most daring actions, Yatsuya's jealousy was set on fire.

—Ayume, you think so highly of Shintaro, and instead of me. Huh! I won't stand for it any longer. Ayume, you're going to be mine.

A mad look appeared in his eyes, like that of a badly wounded beast. He pounced on Ayume and in the blink of an eye, he laid her on the bed. He took off the garment she had put on her shoulders, and then slipped on the fine, immaculate night clothes... Her soft skin and delicate youthful scent made Yatsuya completely lose his mind.

As he squeezed Ayume's fine neck with his left hand, he brought his right hand to the end of her nightgown.

—I... You're hurting me, — cried Ayume.

—Listen to me, Ayume.

—You're hurting me, let me go...

—Will you be mine, Ayume?

Ayume nodded slightly.

—Really? Do you understand my feelings? Will you give yourself to me?

When Yatsuya, exultant with joy at the woman's sudden submission, relaxed the pressure of his hands and raised his upper body, Ayume suddenly extended her right hand.

—Ah! What are you doing?

Ayume had plunged the dagger she held in her right hand into her own chest. In an instant the fresh blood stained her immaculate skin and night

clothes a deep red.

IV

Shintaro was racing down the road, blood dripping from open wounds on his right shoulder and left elbow, when the figure of a person appeared in front of him.

The traveler walking along this road at this time of night must have had some very important and urgent business to attend to. He walked with a steady step, but as the moonlight shone upon his face surprisingly he turned out to be an old man with a white beard. As he saw the figure of Shintaro approaching him, running and still carrying the unsheathed blade in his hand, he stopped short and simply pulled to the side of the road, not looking particularly surprised. His eyes tightened, however, and his aged body assumed a stance that would allow him to deal with any situation that might arise immediately.

As if he had not caught the presence of that old man standing in the shadows of the pines at the edge of the road, or as if he feared that Tada Umanosuke was still pursuing him, Shintaro ran past him without so much as a glance.

But then the old man caught a glimpse of his downcast face, and he let out a surprised cry:

—Shintaro!

—Eh?

—You're not Shintaro?

—Oh, father!

—But what happened to you?

—Father, please stop Tada.

—Don't lose your temper. Calm down. No one is chasing you.

Relieved, Shintaro relaxed and took a deep breath. Haruie told him in a calm manner:

—You're hurt. I'm going to apply first aid to you, — while his father was treating his wounds, Shintaro spoke to him briefly about Umanosuke's attack, — Don't worry, I'll talk to Tada.

Accompanied by Shintaro, who had already re-sheathed his sword, he went to take a look at the site of the skirmish, but there was no sign of Umanosuke. It was not until after returning to the castle city of Sunpu and staying at a hostel that the elderly father and his badly wounded son were able to converse without reservation, for the first time in a long time.

—But father, what are you doing here?

In response to Shintaro's doubts, Haruie explained that according to the latest news he had received from Ayume after he left Kashima for Edo, she had left for Sunpu to go and find Shintaro. Upon hearing this, Haruie could not contain the anguish he felt, so he decided to come himself, despite his advanced age.

—Anyway, Shintaro, I still do not understand your behavior since the day of the spring tournament. I suppose you must have good reasons. Don't hide it any longer and tell me everything.

By speaking with his father, Shintaro lost all will to continue to keep the abominable suspicions he had been harboring until now a secret.

—Father, take a look at this.

Shintaro showed Haruie the *inro* and *netsuke* he had received from Yatsuya.

—Oh! How is it that these items are in your possession?

—When Hinatsu Kizaemon was killed, the *netsuke* appeared lying beside him. The *inro* was found in the room where Kashiwabara Shinobee died. Despite that Shintaro pronounced these words as he examined his father's face intently, with a hopeless boldness, as if he were plunging into a deep abyss, Haruie immediately responded with a tone of voice that contained no shadow:

—This is very strange. When Hijiko came to see me, I left that *inro* on the table, including the *netsuke*, and someone must have stolen it.

—Stolen... Is that true, Father?

—Why would I lie to you? I'm not so senile that I would lose something I hang around my waist in every possible place.

Suddenly, Shintaro felt the blindfold that had been covering his eyes dropping and everything came before him with meridian clarity.

—The wretch Mizutani has concocted all this.

Haruie was frightened by the terrible expression on Shintaro's face.

—What has Mizutani done?

—Father, forgive me for having doubted you. I am very sorry.

Shintaro explained everything to Haruie. As he listened to his son's story, Haruie's surprise and outrage grew.

—Despicable scoundrel. Recommending a bastard like that to lord Tadanaga as a representative of the Shinto style was a serious mistake that will be difficult for all the swordsmen of Kashima to make up for.

—Father, I will kill him, — Shintaro was enraged.

—Wait. First you must recover from these wounds. As you told me, you must face him in a duel with royal swords in the presence of lord Tadanaga. That would be a good opportunity to finish him off admirably in

the splendid setting of that tournament.

Shintaro replied, gritting his teeth, that he could not wait that long, but finally Haruie managed to calm him down.

—Father, what has become of Ayume?

—She must surely be here in Sunpu.

—What if that wretch Mizutani is tricking her with his sweet talk?

—No, Ayume is a girl of firm character. I'll go out and get her tomorrow.

From the next day on, Haruie looked for Ayume in every corner of the castle town, but he could not find out her whereabouts. And to make matters worse, the wound Shintaro had suffered on his shoulder was more severe than expected and began to fester.

—Whatever it is, you must heal yourself completely before the duel.

Haruie began to worry so, for the time being, he took Shintaro to the Shimobe spa, which had been one of the secret spas and exclusive use of the Takeda Shingen *daimyo*, and which was said to be very effective in healing cuts, so that he could recover. But the recovery was not progressing well, and was not only due to purely physical conditions, but also influenced by psychological causes, such as the uneasiness Shintaro felt at the thought of Ayume.

Ten days passed and, although the wound on his left elbow was practically healed, he still couldn't move his right arm freely.

"Will it really be healed by the day of the duel?"

"What have become of Ayume?"

Holding these dark thoughts in his heart, Shintaro walked alone along a mountain road that ran along the bank of the Tokiwa River. As he innocently took a bend in the road, a man suddenly appeared before his eyes.

—Ah! — Shintaro stood stiff in place.

The other man, too, exclaimed in surprise.

—Urabe, what are you doing here? What brings you to this place?

The one who spoke to him so shamelessly was none other than Mizutani Yatsuya himself, who had come with Ayume to the same inn in Shimobe. That night, when Ayume plunged the dagger into her chest, Yatsuya was scared to death, called for a physician and went out of his way to care for her. When Ayume regained consciousness, she kept tormenting herself by repeating the name of Shintaro and saying she wanted to make sure he was dead or alive. To satisfy Ayume's wish, a servant from the house of Iimura, named Yokichi, was sent to the city.

—Apparently two Shinto style swordsmen, one named Ishimura and the other Urabe, were surrounded by castle security forces on suspicion of

being spies: Ishimura was arrested and Urabe was killed, — Yokichi reported on his return.

—Ishimura was the alias of Tada, and the other is Urabe, just as I told you. Paying no attention to Yatsuya's words, Ayume let out a desperate sob and gave in to the sadness.

Ayume was growing weaker from the wounds she had received in both soul and body, so Yatsuya brought her to this spa to calm and heal her.

Hearing Ayume say that she wished to die to join Shintaro, Yatsuya reminded her of Haruie and persuaded her to return to Kashima for the time being to inform Haruie of what had happened and offer prayers for Shintaro's soul. He also swore to her that, having understood her feelings, he would never try to force her again.

"I am convinced that this woman's feelings will change... One day she will be mine", Yatsuya thought and changed his strategy to prepare for a long war.

What he didn't expect, however, was to meet Shintaro at that hot spring resort.

One day he had met Umanosuke and upon learning that he had struck Shintaro in the right shoulder, Yatsuya gloated as she imagined that after being slashed in the shoulder by someone as skilled as Umanosuke, it would be impossible for Shintaro to fully recover before the duel. He was convinced that victory would be his, and felt that above all Ayume should not learn of Shintaro's survival until after the duel.

As he met Shintaro unexpectedly on that mountain path and found that the wound on his right shoulder was more severe than he had expected, and that his right arm was hanging from a piece of cloth and seemed completely useless, Yatsuya made up his mind at once:

"This is my chance. Right now I'm going to kill him once and for all."

And it was Shintaro himself who gave him the perfect alibi for that purpose.

—Mizutani, how could you deceive me like that and sully my father's honour?

—What are you talking about? Have you lost your mind, Urabe?

—Hey, you bastard! It was you who murdered Hinatsu and Kashiwabara, stole my father's *inro*, and poured false accusations on it. Did you intend to excuse yourself to the end by saying that you knew nothing?

The beautiful face of Yatsuya suddenly underwent a radical transformation and began to ooze a fierce, demonic expression.

—Huh! Have you finally realized, fool?

—I will not forgive you for this!

—You're trying to confront me in your condition? Are you so unattached to your life?

—Bastard!

Shintaro managed to draw the sword with his left hand, but...

"Shit! In this state I'm no match for him."

Shintaro bitterly regretted his immaturity by losing his temper like that.

—If that's what you want, I'll kill you.

Yatsuya drew his sword with confidence.

Though unaccustomed to wielding his blade in his left hand, Shintaro attempted an amazing left-handed death match.

Had it been any other rival, he would surely have been brought down by the almost reckless attack of the injured Shintaro, inflamed with rage. His opponent, however, was Yatsuya, with whom he was tied on skill, and who was in perfect physical condition.

Ultimately the outcome of the match was what one might have expected from the beginning. Yatsuya cunningly dodged Shintaro's attacks, hoping that Shintaro would eventually give up, waiting to take advantage of his fatigue.

—Drop dead now! — he shouted in a thunderous voice and lunged. By then Shintaro had no more strength left to defend from this blow.

Shintaro's blood gushed out and he collapsed in the middle of the road.

Yatsuya was about to finish him off but he heard the voices of several people coming around the bend. Yatsuya fled the scene like a frightened rabbit.

V

The information Yokichi gave Ayume after he was sent to the city to confirm the death of Shintaro — that, of the two spies named Ishimura and Urabe, one had died and the other was in custody — was not false. The only thing she could discern from what Yatsuya had told her was the date of the events, but Ayume did not even notice because of how upset she was by Shintaro's death.

While he was in bed with the wound Shintaro had inflicted on his left shoulder, Ishimura Saza — that is, Tada Umanosuke — was secretly visited by a man named Kiyokawa Genta Hyoei, a *hatamoto* like himself who had come from Edo after being given a secret mission by Doi Toshikatsu.

When the two were having a confidential conversation, a great commotion

and multiple footsteps was heard and the paper sliding door was kicked down.

—The spy Tada Umanosuke is under arrest, — about fifteen officers broke in.

—What are you talking about? I am Ishimura Saza, a Hitachi *ronin*, and this is my friend... Urabe Gentaro.

—Silence! Your identity as a spy has already been discovered. Do not resist being bound.

But as soon as that agent's voice was finished speaking and he was about to do his duty, he started to whimper and fell backwards. Umanosuke was standing on his bed, wielding a bloodstained blade.

—You, flee! — he urged Kiyokawa before charging into the crowd of agents.

Despite a badly wounded left shoulder, Umanosuke had his right hand in perfect condition, so his powerful blade was so overwhelming that one was amazed. For some reason in the Matsuoka *dojo* he and Kabuto Gyobu were considered a pair of jewels without equal.

In an instant he killed three agents, wounded two others, and the remaining group of agents had to retreat to the garden.

—Kiyokawa, run away!

—Don't be an idiot, I'll fight too!

Kiyokawa had knocked down two other officers as well.

—You don't have to do this. The important thing is the mission. Make way while I'm still fighting.

—All right, Tada, I'll leave it to you.

After seeing Kiyokawa's figure make its way through the side and run, Umanosuke continued to fight even harder. When virtually all the officers in that group were already dead or badly injured, a second group of twenty officers rode in after receiving an urgent notification.

Umanosuke had already consumed most of his energy and could be said to be shattered after receiving a dozen wounds all over his body. Though he managed to injure half of the second group of agents, he was finally captured.

Kiyokawa managed to escape, but his pursuers surrounded him on the outskirts of the city and shot him dead with their rifles.

Obviously, it had been Mizutani Yatsuya who had exposed Ishimura Saza by revealing that his name was in fact Tada Umanosuke and he was a spy for the shogunate. Having managed to suppress all of his competitors in this manner, Yatsuya was brimming with confidence and, having

persuaded Ayume, took her to Shimobe. Once there, on the Minobu mountain, he had also managed to finish off his chief competitor, Shintaro.

While all these events were taking place, with the imminent tournament of duels with real swords to be held in the presence of the feudal lord, people were gathering incessantly in the city of Sunpu Castle and gossip about the tournament was growing.

The pairings for the eleven matches had already been officially announced. First duel: Irako Seigen versus Fujiki Gennosuke.

The first was completely blind and lame on his right foot, but thanks to his bizarre sword technique that he called Mumyo Sakanagare there were already many mysterious rumors about him around the castle town.

The other was another of Seigen's fellow disciples, and it seems that in the confrontation between the two, rivalry for the sword skills was mixed with love for Mie, the daughter of his master, Iwamoto Kogan, and Iku, his concubine.

Second duel: Zanami Kanzaemon, Suruga's vassal, against Isoda Kinu. Kinu, despite being a woman, was an expert in the use of naginata. She had courageously requested this duel to avenge the death of her late husband Hisanoshin, killed by Kanzaemon.

Third duel: Tsukioka Yukinosuke versus Kurokawa Kojiro.

Tsukioka was a *ronin* originally from the Owari fief, but now called himself Hoshikawa Ikunosuke and had opened a *dojo* in the city of Sunpu. Kurokawa had proposed this duel through the Owari fiefdom to officially take revenge on Tsukioka, who had murdered his uncle Yabe Rokudayu.

Fourth duel: Sasahara Shuzaburo against Kutsuki Gannosuke.

The first was the respected spear handler of the Suruga fiefdom, an expert praised for his exquisite stroke. Kutsuki, on the other hand, was a quarrelsome wanderer of unknown lineage who lived secluded in a cave on Mount Fuji, and who had so far killed three people with his sword: the warriors of the fief Saida Sonosuke and Sasahara Gonpachiro, and the *ronin* Kurakawa Kizaemon. The trigger had been Gannosuke's illicit love for Chika, the daughter of master Ichidensai.

No one could have predicted whether Kutsuki would accept the challenge of Shuzaburo, the cousin of Gonpachiro, and come out of his cave to perform at the dueling arena on the appointed day; but it was precisely this that aroused even greater interest among the spectators.

Fifth duel: Tsuruoka Junnosuke versus Fukada Gonoshin

Both were vassals of the fief, and despite being childhood friends, a mutual hatred between them began to emerge, not clear how long ago, caused by the swords and the women, who decided to settle the duel. When the advisor Saegusa forbade them to do so, they threatened to leave the fiefdom to become masterless samurai so that they could fight a duel. Reluctantly, they were allowed to participate in the duel-to-the-death tournament.

Sixth duel: Kojima Sozo against Tsugami Kuninosuke.

Both were vassals who had been recruited between half a year and a year ago, and only the most senior officers of the fief knew the circumstances under which these two were forced to participate in a duel to the death. Among the rumors circulating in the castle city, there were those who claimed that they had requested to duel over the enmity that had arisen out of their love for the daughter of one of Kashima of the same fief, and there were also those who claimed that this was a move to punish Tsugami, who had been suspected of the recent murder of Ai, Tadanaga's servant, and Kojima as well.

Seventh duel: Kuroe Gotaro against Kataoka Kyonosuke.

Kuroe was a swordsman who had opened a *dojo* in the town of Kofu Castle and was known to have devised his own style of fencing with two swords: the Mirai-chishin.

Kataoka was a member of the Suruga fiefdom guard and an expert in the Nikaido style. It was said that the two would fight for the honor of their respective schools, but there was great interest, especially among professional swordsmen, to see what kind of duel could be witnessed between the Hiryuken ("flying dragon sword") technique of the former and the Tareito ("hanging thread") stance of the latter.

Eighth duel: Komura Gennosuke vs. Shindo Buzaemon.

Komura was a master of the Hangan style, and among the ten secret techniques of that school, he had made the "hurricane sword" his greatest specialty. Shindo was an expert in the handling of the Shinto-style spear, and in particular he boasted of the invincibility of his exquisite technique for piercing the curtains of military camps.

A curtain like that of the military camps was extended in the enclosure especially for this duel, and Shindo was allowed to attack Komura through it.

Ninth duel: Shibayama Hanbee versus Kurita Hikotaro.

Shibayama Hanbee was a brave warrior who survived the battlefields, was now over sixty years old, and still served in the fief of Suruga as a horse trainer.

Kurita Hikotaro, on the other hand, was a twenty-five year old archery magistrate from the same fief.

Furthermore, it had been officially announced that these two opponents would face each other as if it were a real combat: wearing armor and a helmet, and riding horses.

The origin of this duel was the mockery of Shibayama, who scoffed at Kurita's technique saying that the fencing he was taught in the *dojo* was useless on the battlefield.

Tenth duel: Naruse Daishiro against Sasajima Shimanosuke.

Because Naruse had cut a certain foe of the *Itto* style and a stone at the same time, he was called Daishiro "the stone cutter", but in reality he was a renowned swordsman of a faction of the Shinto style. Sasajima was a *ronin* from Sendai who, on Naruse's recommendation, was hired to serve in the Suruga fiefdom. However, because he had seduced Kinue, the wife of his benefactor Naruse, the latter sent him a letter of challenge; then Sasajima stirred this further and suggested fighting him in a duel before the feudal lord, with real swords.

Eleventh duel: Mizutani Yatsuya against Urabe Shintaro.

Both Naruse and Sasajima followed the schools of Mamiya and Oribe, factions descended from the Shinto style, but Mizutani Yatsuya participated as the representative of the Shinto style, accepting the challenge of Urabe Shintaro. The winner of the duel was considered to be officially hired as the kendo instructor of the Suruga fiefdom.

After killing Shintaro, Yatsuya immediately moved to the foot of Mount Minobu to avoid the Shimobe resort. He tried to keep Ayume away from all the rumors coming from the city of Sunpu, but in the face of the impending duel he realized that even if Shintaro had managed to escape the clutches of death, he would not be able to participate in the duel. So he returned with Ayume to the house of Iimura, outside Sunpu, and immediately went to visit Saegusa Izunokami.

—I have heard that Urabe Shintaro is missing... — Yatsuya said to Saegusa with a look of ignorance, but Saegusa answered with a wry smile: —Apparently Shintaro is injured and cannot participate in the tournament. Instead, his father Urabe Haruie has asked us to face you in the duel.

—Huh? Lord Urabe Haruie?

—That's right. As he is an old man in his eighties, I thought it was absurd and tried to stop him, but there was no way to make him come to his senses. How about you? Do you want to try to face Haruie, the nephew of the famous Tsukahara Bokuden and a veteran of the Shinto style?

—I will certainly not back down, — Yatsuya assured him but then Saegusa poured out some caustic words.

—Mizutani, the rumors circulating about you are not good at all. Haruie has told me all the details about the Kashima affair: no, no, no, do not try to excuse yourself. It is better that you withdraw.

VI

Yatsuya told Ayume that since Shintaro had passed away, Haruie had come to challenge him in his place.

—Uncle Urabe? — shouted Ayume, finally recovered from her wound, and blood streamed down her pale face, — My uncle is an old octogenarian, and yet you plan to duel him?

—In the way of the sword there is no age to consider. Lord Haruie is a skilled and fearsome opponent... But he certainly won't defeat me.

—Please don't do it. Please!

—You don't have to worry. Even if I'm not defeated, I'm not going to kill Haruie or anything. I intend to end up in a draw, because it would be hard enough for you to hate me even more.

—I have to go see my uncle. Where is he?

—Shintaro was killed because there were suspicions that he was a spy. Naturally, lord Haruie has also been arrested by the authorities of the fief, so you won't be able to see him.

While Yatsuya and Ayume were having this conversation, just at the same time, Shintaro have pierced his own stomach with a short sword. Having been seriously injured twice, he was aware that he would not be able to participate in the duel in any way, so he had courageously chosen the path of suicide.

—Shintaro, but what are you doing? Stupid! — Haruie professed with a piercing cry as he burst into the room, but Shintaro was already struggling to breathe when he answered:

—Father, please give up tomorrow's duel. Locate Ayume, return with her to Kashima and quietly... — he said before collapsing and falling to the ground.

A thirst for revenge burned like a flame through the old Haruie's body, and his wrinkled face boiled red.

—It's all right, Mizutani. Despite being an old man, this Urabe will risk his life to finish you, — Haruie swore, clasping his hands before the mortal remains of his beloved son, whose life had been cut short at such a young age.

And so it was on the day of the duel, when the sun was already beginning to descend towards the west, that the old swordsman Urabe Haruie and the young swordsman Mizutani Yatsuya finally came face to face, each wielding a drawn sword and silencing all the fateful events that had occurred since the spring.

After each duel, the white sand of the southern courtyard inside Sunpu Castle was swept and purified. Yet despite that the blood spilled in the ten fights to the death that had already taken place since morning, seemed to boil underneath the newly spread sand.

Above all an indescribable, eerie stench of decay hung in the air throughout the courtyard and virtually all onlookers began to feel mildly nauseous or dizzy.

The ten duels that had been fought so far had ended with the results as follows.

In the first duel, Fujiki Gennosuke defeated the demonic *mumyo sakanagare* of Irako Seigen and diagonally cut off his torso. At the same time, the two women Iku and Mie, who were behind the curtains, each stabbed themselves in the chest and both died.

In the second duel, Isoda Kinu's naginata delivered a *kabuto-wari* ("helmet-breaking") blow to Zanamī Kanzaemon's forehead against all odds.

In the third duel, Kurokawa was unable to exact his revenge as he was struck down by *ukifune*, the best technique of Tsukioka Yukinosuke of the Toda School.

In the fourth duel, despite suffering a cut to his left knee, Sasahara Shuzaburo speared Kutsuki Gannosuke from his right shoulder to his spine, but even so, the dying Gannosuke threw a knife into Chika's chest, the object of his forbidden love.

Before the official start of the fifth duel, the opponents Tsuruoka Junnosuke and Fukada Gonoshin had already drawn their *katana* and begun to fight, but in the end both unwittingly adopted the same stance, *shishi hanteki* ("the lion's counter"), collided with each other, thrust their short sword into each other's side and died simultaneously.

In the sixth duel, Kojima Sozo was wounded by the *shuriken* from "the crosscutting windmill" attack, but he took advantage of an oversight by Tsugami Kuninosuke to run his blade through. However, he died immediately afterwards from the shot fired by the chief of the riflemen, Kenmochi Jisuke.

To be killed was the fate that naturally befitted Tsugami, for he was a spy.

During the seventh duel, Kataoka Kyonosuke deliberately allowed his opponent to destroy his specialty, the "hanging thread" stance, and despite Kuroe Gotaro's "flying dragon sword" that Kataoka felt on his left shoulder, he killed his opponent.

In the eighth duel Shindo pierced with the tip of his spear, but Komura skillfully dodged it, cut the ropes that held the curtains and, grabbing one end of the cloth, began to spin around Shindo until he rolled him into the curtain. Finally he slit Shindo's throat.

In the ninth duel, Kurita Hikotaro cut through the groin of his opponent, the brave warrior Shibayama Hanbee, with a long military record behind him, and after knocking him off his horse he punctured his throat.

The reality, however, is that instead of Hikotaro his father Jirodayu fought, and instead of Hanbee his son Shinzo fought. Both hid their faces with their helmets and face shields and faced one another without either knowing the other was a substitute.

Before the tenth duel, Naruse Daishiro demonstrated his secret stone-cutting technique. The fierce duel then ended in a draw with Shimanosuke, and both fell dead.

Of the twenty competitors who had participated in the ten duels that had taken place since the beginning of the morning, counting also those who had ended in a draw or gunfire, twelve swordsmen had already lost their lives, three had been seriously injured, and three women had died in the crowd: two had committed suicide and one had been stabbed with a dagger.

Whose blood would be shed in the eleventh and final match of the tournament?

The evening was already looming over the pine trees inside the castle and there was a dead silence, but in that gloomy atmosphere one could clearly sense the aversion felt by the people who were no longer interested in the outcome of the duel, and whose only wish was that it should end as soon as possible.

With his sword on guard, Haruie's whole body was full of a strength of a man in his prime, and his rigorous, firm spirit filled the tip of his unsheathed sword.

—Mizutani, I'm going to teach you a lesson.

Haruie spat out these vehement words to Yatsuya with boundless fury shining in his piercing eyes, but for his part Yatsuya was, as usual, the calm personified, with his white brow shining brighter and brighter and his incredible beauty intact.

—You are too old for such things. You should follow Shintaro's example,

— Yatsuya spat in derision.

—I, Haruie, on behalf of the founding master Bokuden, will punish this affront in the Shinto style.

—I am the representative of the Shinto style here. I will kill the senile old man and take over Bokuden-style and Ayume... Heh, heh, heh! Ayume has already been disgraced! — Turbing the opponent by hitting him where it hurts most emotionally was Yatsuya's usual tactic. And it had the right effect, — Yes, even Ayume...

With his whole body filled with indignation and an absolutely incredible agility for an old man in his eighties, Haruie brought his sword down on Yatsuya's head. Yatsuya had been anticipating this move from the beginning. His light, supple limbs, as agile as a panther or a hawk, leapt from side to side. He had been able to sense from the first attack that Haruie's blade was even more dangerous and fearsome, so he made the decision to prolong the duel and wait until the old man's body began to suffer from fatigue.

He dodged the attacks of Haruie's sword; he fled to the right, to the left, to the back; he jumped... to the point that cries of reproach began to arise among the spectators, who considered this attitude to be that of a coward. Without paying any attention to them, however, Yatsuya continued to run and wander around the wide space of the arena to get away from Haruie's attacks, as if he were playing around.

But finally the moment Yatsuya had been waiting for arrived. Haruie found it difficult to breathe and the movement of his legs became more clumsy. Realizing this, Yatsuya moved wildly to attack.

Unwittingly, Haruie was cornered on the defensive, but his intuition as a seasoned swordsman over many years quickly helped him to make up his mind:

"There is no alternative other than the simultaneous attack; my bones will be pierced by his sword, and I will pierce his bones with mine."

—Eeeee! Ooou! — shouted Haruie and headed for Yatsuya's sword to strike with his own body.

That violent, indescribable attack drove Yatsuya's body backwards, forcing him to take a step back, when a stream of blood gushed from his left shoulder.

At the same moment, however, Yatsuya split Haruie's forehead in two, and Haruie's white beard turned a deep red. He staggered sideways and finally collapsed heavily on the sand.

With a wound so deep that his left arm was almost severed and his pale forehead covered with sweat, Yatsuya was declared the victor and headed for the curtain area, dripping with blood. As he approached, however, a voice echoed sharply amidst the commotion at the end of the tournament.

—Prepare yourself!

The short sword held by Ayume sank deep into Yatsuya.

—Uuuuh! — as he grunted, Yatsuya almost unconsciously made a horizontal cut with his sword.

—Aaah!

Hearing Ayume's agonizing cries, Yatsuya collapsed instantly.

From the end of the Sengoku era to the beginning of the Tokugawa era, the Shinto style had been one of the three great styles of fencing, along with the *Shinkage* style of Koizumi Musashinokami and Yagyu Tajimanokami, and the *Itto* style of Ito Ittosai; but then it gradually declined. In particular, all succession of the *Bokuden* style, descendant of the *Shinto* style, was cut off because through the fateful massacre previously reported all the outstanding swordsmen of that school met a horrible death.

ALL SAMURAI HAVE FALLEN

I

Secret Record of the Great Chancellor of Suruga, in the possession of the family of Tejima Takeichiro, resident in the city of Shizuoka, is the only reliable document regarding the dueling tournament with real swords that was held at Suruga Castle on September 24th in the sixth year of the Kan'ei era (1629), in the presence of the lord of the castle and Great Chancellor, Tadanaga.

According to this codex, out of the twenty-two competitors who took part in the eleven duels that were held that day, fourteen of them died instantly as a result of defeat or a draw; two others were killed just after the duel was over; only six survivors remained, but two of them had also suffered serious injuries. This was undoubtedly a Dantean spectacle, brutally bloody, never before seen except perhaps on the battlefield.

The only four winners who were unharmed were the following:
Fujiki Gennosuke of the Kogan school, who managed to defeat the mysterious *mumyo sakanagare* technique of the blind swordsman Irako Seigen.

Isoda Kinu, who despite being a woman managed to avenge her husband's death by killing his murderer Zanami Kanzaemon, Suruga's vassal and expert of the Iimagawa style, with her naginata.

Tsukioka Yukinosuke, who against his will ended up killing Kurokawa Kojiro despite using the Mineuchi Fusetsu technique "hitting with the non-lethal back of the sword".

Komura Gennosuke, an expert in the Hangan style who managed to defeat the spear thrust through the curtain of Shindo Buzaemon.

The swordsmen who were seriously injured but that finally saved the life were:

Sasahara Shuzaburo, the *sojutsu* instructor of Suruga fief, who despite receiving a slash in the knee was able to bring down the vagabond swordsman Kutsuki Gannosuke.

Kataoka Kyonosuke, of the Nikaido style, who, despite receiving a deep stab in the left shoulder, managed to defeat Hiryuken ("the sword of the flying dragon") of the Mirai-chishin style of Kuroe Gotaro and kill him.

However, just when it seemed that the tournament had come to an end, the unexpected appearance of a fearless swordsman who called himself Kuruma Daizen triggered the brutal murder of Tsukioka Yukinosuke and then caused Komura Gennosuke a deep wound in his side.

Therefore, the only one who was completely unharmed other than Isoda Kinu was Fujiki Gennosuke, although he was missing his left arm from the beginning. Even so, since it had been previously announced that the winner of the tournament would be hired to serve in the fiefdom, Fujiki was immediately notified of his hiring, but surprisingly he firmly rejected it right away.

—Why do you not accept the lenient orders of our lord? Does the three hundred *koku* seem insufficient to you? — the visibly grumpy advisor Saegusa questioned him. Fujiki, however, answered him without any trace of conceit, only thanking him somewhat disconcertedly:

—I humbly consider that someone like me does not deserve the honor of being hired for such an exorbitant stipend, and furthermore I have no desire to serve as a samurai.

Saegusa himself was puzzled and did not know what to do. Tadanaga had ordered him to hire him without taking no for an answer, and it was quite unthinkable to oppose the wishes of that man who looked like an incarnation of fury.

—After what you have said, I will not instigate you any further. But couldn't you at least stay in the castle for a while and give the young people some lessons? I'm only asking you this favor.

After Saegusa's explanations and the fact that he had relented to such an extent, Fujiki could not refuse outright, so he replied that he would honor Saegusa's wishes.

Saegusa was very cunning. His real intention was to get him to stay in the castle for the time being, and while he was there, find the best opportunity to try and persuade him by any means. Fujiki, however, had his reasons for so stubbornly rejecting a profitable position as a samurai in the service of a lord that many would gladly accept.

The burning desire to avenge the deaths of his master Iwamoto Kogan and his veteran companion Ushimata Gonzaemon was not the only thing that had led him to kill Irako Seigen.

Of course, his swordsmanship had been a great motivator, but at the same time it must be acknowledged that he was driven even more by his great desire to win the heart of Mie, the daughter of Kogan.

Mie had told him, "If you kill Seigen, I will become your wife that very night". And for three years she had been by his side, spurring him on. It is easy to imagine the agony that young Fujiki Gennosuke had to suffer as he lived all those long months and years with the daughter of the master he so longed for, without being able to lay a finger on her.

He dreamed of the night when he would finally escape that living hell and

be able to hold Mie's naked body tightly to his chest with his one arm, and he kept trying so hard.

And at last he managed to defeat the *mumyo sakanagare* technique of Seigen. But immediately afterwards his dream was shattered in an atrocious way. As soon as Seigen collapsed, Mie, who was watching from behind the scenes, plunged a dagger into his chest and took her own life. "Despite asking me so insistently to kill him, and despite being the murderer of her own father, Mie loved Seigen, even at the cost of her own life."

An apathy assailed him as if he had run out of blood in his veins.

"Why have I risked my life in the way of the sword?"

Everything seemed empty, irritating and sad to him. It was impossible for him to get excited about serving as a samurai. In fact, it seemed to him now that there was no point in continuing his daily existence. He had no encouragement to keep going. His only plan for the moment, if only to reward Saegusa's kindness, was to train the vassals of the castle.

When Kataoka Kyonosuke and Komura Gennosuke, also winners of the dueling tournament, had recovered from the injuries they both suffered to their bodies, they often had occasion to meet with Fujiki, as both were also vassals of the Suruga fief. All three had witnessed each other's fighting style on the day of the tournament, and knew them well. They all had equal respect for each other's sword technique. It seemed that Fujiki's mind was only relieved during the time he spent with them discussing issues related to the sword training. One of the topics they often discussed in their conversations was of the another people who had won their duel in the tournament, like Isoda Kinu. Well, actually more than Kinu, they were talking about their former opponent, Zanami Kanzaemon.

—It's totally incomprehensible to me. I know Zanami's Imagawa style very well. Kinu also uses naginata with great skill, but in a normal fight she's no match for Zanami. From the way she fought in that duel, it seemed that Zanami was deliberately throwing himself into a collision with Kinu's naginata, — said Komura, who knew Zanami well in life.

—You are right, it seemed as if he was enjoyed being wounded. Could it be that Zanami, right from the beginning, wanted to be wounded by Kinu?

— Kataoka was of the same opinion. Kinu's husband, Hisanoshin, was a close friend of Zanami's. Hisanoshin went crazy and attacked him, so Zanami had no choice but to finish him off. Perhaps he felt remorse for having murdered his own friend and set out to be killed willingly by Kinu's vengeful naginata.

This was also the most widespread opinion in the clan. Then Fujiki intervened in the conversation, listening to them from the side.

—What kind of relationship was there between this Zanami and Kinu? Was she only his friend's wife?

—No, if I remember correctly Kinu was Zanami's cousin.

—In that case, they'd have known each other since childhood, right?

—Well, I guess so.

Fujiki was silent. However, it was probably only Fujiki at that time who was able to discern, if only partially, the true nature of the situation.

Obviously, even Fujiki had no way of guessing that Zanami was born with a tendency towards masochism, but at least he sensed that Zanami must have been very much in love with Kinu. Perhaps this was due to the bitter personal experience he had himself.

It was because of this observation that Fujiki began to feel some curiosity about Isoda Kinu. He kept in his memory a uniquely sharp image of Kinu's silhouette on the day of the tournament. With her long black hair hidden from the roots by a tight white ribbon, dressed from head to toe in pristine white and carrying a naginata, totally resigned to her fate, she was so beautiful that for a few moments it took the breath away from those who looked upon her.

Not that she was merely beautiful, surely in one corner of Fujiki's mind there had been an image of something in her features that made her look very much like Mie.

Several days later, a young vassal pointed at her:

—That's Isoda's widow over there...

As Fujiki looked in the direction he was pointing, he felt as if something inside him suddenly took a turn of one hundred and eighty degrees.

Perhaps it was the violent shock of the sudden dispersal of the obsession with Mie that had consumed him to the core until that moment.

II

Komura Gennosuke decided that he wanted to thoroughly clarify his doubts about the duel between Zanami Kanzaemon and Kinu. It was what one would expect of him as a swordsman.

He did not know that, since childhood, Zanami had an aberrant masochistic tendency and that when he was wounded by beautiful men or women he felt an extreme pleasure, nor that it was precisely because of this that he had lost the opportunity to obtain a good position on many occasions. Zanami was in love with Kinu. And when this man loved

someone, if he could not get the person he loved to give him deep wounds, he did not feel alive. This, which for ordinary people is impossible to understand, was instead a need that Kanzaemon could not escape from. When his feelings for Kinu reached that point, Kanzaemon began to long for Kinu's edge to cut off his flesh, and he became so obsessed that he was willing to give his life in order to savor that moment of ecstasy. When he murdered Hisanoshin, Kinu's husband, attributing to him an alleged insanity, he knew in advance that Kinu would most certainly ask to avenge his death. And, just as he wished, he was cut down by the blade of Kinu's naginata to no more than a few inches and died in an ecstasy of supreme happiness.

No matter how much Komura pondered the matter, he could never discover these shocking circumstances. Still, he was determined to find out the cause of Kanzaemon's strange defeat, and to that end he approached Isoda Kinu. Beautiful eyes always lead to indiscretion, however.

Komura simply intended to approach Kinu guided by his devotion to the blade, but when one considers Komura's youth and Kinu's beauty it is no mystery that on numerous occasions while he was speaking with her, Komura was deeply fascinated by her beautiful eyes without realizing it. As much as Komura was an outstanding swordsman, he was apparently quite clumsy when it came to the art of wooing women. The first words with which he expressed his desire were:

—Kinu, I was deeply impressed by your technique with the naginata. May I ask you to confront us sometime?

A few words of the least romantic kind. And yet for him this was a compliment from the soul, so that as soon as the words left his lips his cheeks blushed modestly.

In truth, he did not hold Kinu's naginata in such high regard either.

Obviously, as a woman she would be a remarkable expert, but in a normal fight she did not seem to be a tough competitor to beat. However, he found it difficult to address her and praise her beauty to her face, so he decided to praise her technique with the naginata.

Kinu agreed to her request because she herself did not understand the fighting style of Zanami Kanzaemon in that duel. She was aware that he was fighting with all his heart, but even so she had no illusions that Kanzaemon would be defeated by the tip of his naginata, so when the fight was over and she saw her fallen opponent before him, she could not believe his eyes.

"Was my handling of the naginata really that good?", she often asked herself after the initial period of satisfaction and joy at having been able to

take revenge for the death of her beloved husband Hisanoshin. When Komura proposed a duel, Kinu accepted because it suddenly occurred to her that, through Komura, she could test the real value of her skills with naginata.

Komura and Kinu stood facing each other, he — wielding a wooden sword, and she — wielding a training naginata. The confrontation took place inside the mansion where Kinu had been left alone since the death of her husband.

Seeing Kinu's initial stance, Komura missed an exclamation of admiration in his heart, for he was surprised that it reached such a level.

—Excuse me... — Kinu shouted, lifted her naginata over her head and lowered it with a diagonal motion.

Komura dodged the blow easily, but she continued to attack him with all sorts of moves — upward cut, mowing cut, upward diagonal cut, right-hand body cut, simultaneous cut, side cut — and with an intensity and skill unusual for a woman. That series of attacks was as if her single naginata had been divided into several and was spinning like a wheel, or like a powerful waterfall falling over her; an ordinary person would not have time to take so many blows.

As one might expect, however, the movements of Komura, an expert in the Hangan style whose specialty is agility and speed, were masterful. If the blow went to the right, he was already on the left; if the blow went to the left, he was already behind his opponent; he circled like a whirlwind around his opponent and did not let the edge of his weapon get near him. When Kinu finally began to show signs of fatigue, Komura put into practice one of the secret techniques of the Hangan style, the hurricane blade, and lunged at her like a bird in flight. With his left hand he grabbed the hilt of the naginata, and with the sword in his right hand he stabbed Kinu in the chest.

—You have defeated me, — recognized Kinu as she wiped the sweat from her brow.

—It was impressive, you fought very well, — Komura exclaimed with sincere admiration as he unconsciously stared in fascination at Kinu's flushed, seductive face.

As she laid down their weapons of choice and sat in the outer corridor, Kinu began to speak again:

—Komura, please answer truthfully: In the duel before the feudal lord the other day, do you think Zanami really fought with all his might?

—Well, it's just that... — uttered Komura.

—As far as swords are concerned, I prefer not to lie in the least. It still seems impossible to me that I was able to defeat Zanami with my skills.

—Well, it's just... — Komura hesitated again, but in the end he summoned up his courage and spoke to her decisively.

—Is there anything that would make you suppose that?

—Well, no... It's nothing... — Kinu hurriedly answered, but in her mind the following thought was confirmed: "Actually, Kanzaemon was secretly in love with me".

This was a doubt that occupied a corner of her heart from the moment the fight was over. As she thought about it, the vivid image of Kanzaemon's expression still etched in her retina when he was still alive and came to visit her husband Hisanoshin came to her mind: those eyes that stared at her hid some strange obsession. A touch of compassion for Kanzaemon, her husband's killer, clouded Kinu's deep pupils with sadness.

—Kinu, it's not just Zanami. Anyone who faced you would be weakened by the blade, — Komura muttered, his face so tense that it seemed to tear at the corners of his eyes, and he looked away.

—Huh? What do you mean by that, Komura?

—I mean that... If I were to face you with real swords, I would not be able to hurt you with my sword, — this was clearly a declaration of love.

Seeing Kinu's cheeks blush immediately, Komura continued with a more unequivocal expression:

—Kinu, you are exceptionally beautiful.

It was somewhat indecent to address these words to a woman who had not been widowed for half a year and who was also clearly in love with her late husband. Kinu should have stood up immediately or rebuked him for those words. However, Kinu did neither of these things. No doubt this was because, although it was still far from love, a special affection for Komura had already taken root in Kinu's heart.

What followed was a somewhat embarrassing silence. Had it lasted any longer, perhaps Komura would not have been able to bear the pressure any longer and would have ended up expressing his feelings openly. Just then, however, there was the voice of someone knocking at the front door.

Kinu came to her senses and headed for the door through the garden. At once she returned accompanied by Fujiki Gennosuke.

—Had Komura come to see you as well? — Fujiki said somewhat uncomfortably, but upon noticing the equipment of each, he exclaimed in surprise, — Ah! You two have been practicing together, haven't you?

—Komura had asked me for a duel and I was able to face him today.

—Well, that is very curious, Kinu, but could I face you as well?

—Of course.

Kinu was so excited that she wanted to hit anything that came her way. Komura tried to dissuade her, telling her that she could be tired from the previous fight, but she paid no attention to him, took her naginata again and stood in front of Fujiki.

With his left sleeve empty and hanging languidly, Fujiki held the wooden sword carelessly in his right hand, but the fight was resolved with unusual speed. As soon as Kinu rushed at him with her naginata raised, Fujiki put into practice the *nagareboshi* technique handed down to him by his master Iwamoto Kogan and in an instant he stabbed Kinu right between the eyebrows with the tip of his sword.

—You have defeated me, — Kinu's voice, as you might expect, was somewhat disappointed.

III

Komura did not tell anyone about his fight with Kinu, but Fujiki did tell some people.

—She has impressive skills, for a woman.

If Fujiki uttered those words it was in praise of her, for the serious and rigid Fujiki made no concessions to anyone, even when confronted by a woman, and even if he was in love with her. He therefore defeated Kinu in one fell swoop, but still recognized that Kinu's skill was considerable, considering that she was a woman, and so he expressed it.

But when this came to Kinu's attention, she took it as an insult instead. She interpreted what ostensibly seemed like praise as nothing more than an ironic comment. In the woman's complex heart, her antipathy to Fujiki increased as did her sympathy for Komura.

On the other hand, Fujiki continued to impartially repeat the praise for Kinu. When these reached the ears of advisor Saegusa Izunokami, he could not suppress a smile and summoned Fujiki.

—How are you doing? You still haven't decided to accept the position of vassal? — Saegusa asked, but when he saw that Fujiki was reluctant to answer, he continued, — Fujiki, I suppose you know Isoda Kinu?

—Yes, I know her.

—She is a widow... Wouldn't you like to marry her and settle down here?

-Ah... — apart from that and the sword, everything else was indifferent to this young man.

—What do you think? Will you accept my proposal?

—Yes, — Fujiki bent his head as sweat ran down his back.

—Very good. I will speak to Kinu and tell her that it is the decree of our lord.

If it was a decree, it was binding, so the matter was already decided. For the first time since the loss of Mie, Fujiki Gennosuke felt a renewed and refreshing sensation well up inside his head, and even his steps were lighter.

Saegusa was a man who went straight to the point. He immediately sent for Kinu. Seeing her prostrate before him, she thought:

"Indeed, since she became a widow, she is even more beautiful. If Fujiki accepted perhaps it was because he was not tempted by the three hundred *koku*, but this woman."

Saegusa's lips relaxed.

—Kinu, at the wish of our lord, you must accept Gennosuke as your husband and pass on the name Isoda.

—What?

—I understand perfectly that you are still thinking of Hisanoshin.

However, you succeeded in avenging his death in a spectacular manner, so you should have been rid of the grudge you harbored by now. Besides, the very fact that you didn't ruin the Isoda family name would be the best memorial you could offer to Hisanoshin.

These were arbitrary reasons, but generally speaking they made sense, since at that time the continuity of the family name was considered more important than anything else.

Kinu was silent for a moment.

—Kinu, are you not satisfied? Do you dislike Gennosuke? These are the orders of the lord.

As soon as Saegusa emphasized the tone of his words, Kinu, which had grown pale with tension, raised her head to answer:

—I accept the lord's order.

—It will be a joy for our lord. I will inform Gennosuke myself immediately.

Returning home, Kinu could not calm down. She sat down in front of the Buddhist altar dedicated to her husband's funeral tablets. Marrying another man barely half a year after the death of her beloved and loving husband made her feel guilty about her husband more than anything else.

But it was an order. Kinu clung to these words to try to convince herself. All day long she suffered from an uncontrollable agitation in her chest that she did not know how to control.

The next day, in the early afternoon, when she heard the voice of a man who had come to visit her, Kinu's expression changed. The expression on

the visitor's face, Komura, was altered as well. The change in Kinu was due to embarrassment; Komura's was due to indignation. As soon as he crossed his gaze with Kinu's, he roared at her as if to bite her:

—Kinu, is this true? — she confirmed it by bowing her head.

—Do you really want to marry Fujiki? — he scolded her and bowed his head in shock.

—But, Komura, what are you saying?

—Fujiki himself told me. That by the lord's order, he will marry Kinu and become the successor to the Isoda family...

—No, you're wrong, Komura, it's a mistake, — as she screamed like a madman, Kinu felt that because of the great mistake she had made she was running out of blood in her entire body.

—What is a mistake? Kinu, did you not unequivocally accept Saegusa's proposal?

—No, Komura, I just thought he meant you. Saegusa said, "marry Gennosuke". I just thought he meant you.

—Ah! — Komura realized for the first time that he and Fujiki shared the same name.

—Saegusa only said "Gennosuke". If he had said "Fujiki Gennosuke", I would have refused at once. I did not even think about Fujiki, since he is not even a vassal of the fief. I accepted because I was convinced that it was you.

—Kinu, seriously? — Komura was also totally baffled. The fact that Kinu had given his consent thinking it was about him was like a dream come true. Now, what could be done to correct this mistake?

—Kinu, I'm glad to know what your feelings are. But we can't leave this confusion like this.

—Of course not. I'll go immediately to visit Saegusa's mansion and explain everything to him.

—Kinu, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

The two of you left the residence immediately. In front of Saegusa's mansion, Kinu said goodbye to Komura and went in alone to have an audience with the advisor. She told him about her mistake the other day and made it clear that if it was Fujiki Gennosuke, she had no intention of marrying him.

Saegusa was incredibly furious.

—What do you say at this point? Do you think you can take back something you accepted so unequivocally? How irresponsible! I've already explained it to the master, so it can't be changed.

It wasn't true that he had already told this to Tadanaga.

For one thing, it was not Tadanaga's idea at all, but something that Saegusa himself had thought of on his own, without consulting him, in order to keep Fujiki. However, since he believed it was most effective to say that it was the lord's wishes, that was the argument Saegusa intended to make to the end.

—If the reason was that you do not wish to marry another man to keep your late husband happy, I could've interceded for you with our lord. But since it is so capricious that, being willing now to marry again, you say you would accept Komura but not Fujiki, do you think I can go and tell our lord such a thing? You fool! — Saegusa's voice quivered.

IV

Kinu pleaded persistently, until finally Saegusa opened his mouth and told her that these pleas would be useless, and Kinu left the mansion dejected. When Komura approached her impatiently, Kinu informed him of Saegusa's position.

—The only option left is for me to go and talk to Fujiki and try to arrange it. He is a samurai too, and if I explain the situation to him he will surely understand, — Komura decided on the spot — I'm going to see Fujiki right now. Go home and wait for me there.

Having said that, Komura left in a hurry. Kinu lowered her head, stepped through Yokouchi's doorway and headed for her house in Egawacho parallel to the outer moat.

—Get out of the way, you insolent man!

Kinu was so immersed in her thoughts that she did not even hear the sound of the hooves of the approaching horses behind her, but that voice startled her and caused her to turn around. She hastily stepped to the side of the road and knelt.

On those horses were seven riders apparently returning from an expedition. It was obvious that the one riding in the middle was the lord of the castle, Tadanaga.

After riding past Kinu, Tadanaga turned to Nakai Shingoro, the attendant who rode directly behind him, and asked:

—Do you know who this woman is?

—Yes, she is the widow of Isoda Hisanoshin, a member of the clan... Her name is Kinu, if I remember correctly, — the face of the beautiful Kinu was widely known to all the vassals.

With Tadanaga already back at the castle, Nakai Shingoro began to be very busy. Starting with the personal assistant Segawa Sanzaemon, he had to

inform several people in detail about the circumstances of that occasion that the lord had asked him for the name of Isoda Kinu.

Generally, the lord of the castle did not care in the least what a woman's name was. Whatever their names were, to him women were nothing more than a tool to alleviate his own needs. When he asked for a woman's name, however, it was because she caught his eye as a woman. Or to put it another way, when he intended to have her serve him in his own bedroom. Therefore, whenever Tadanaga was interested in a woman's name (whether it was a wife or daughter of a vassal, a castle maid or the maid who assisted him in the bathroom), he immediately had to start the proceedings to have her serve him in his bedroom.

"How nice that she is a widow", thought Segawa Sanzaemon, the first to be informed, since they had already had all sorts of problematic experiences in the past because the requested woman was the wife of a clan member.

However, when Saegusa heard this news from Segawa, he was perplexed.

"Tch... What a mess I'm in now."

Saegusa was racking his brains. For this man, his master's wishes were completely unquestionable, since his only virtue was to have all Tadanaga's whims satisfied.

An already complicated situation seemed to have gotten out of hand due to the intrusion of Tadanaga's wishes.

"I have no choice but to force Fujiki to give up Kinu, and force her to comply with our lord's wishes."

That was the only possible conclusion.

He immediately sent someone to summon Kinu. She arrived in the vain hope that perhaps Saegusa had changed her mind, so upon receiving such an unexpected order, she was stunned.

—You say you dislike Fujiki, but to allow you to marry Komura at this point would be a disgrace to Fujiki. Therefore, at the express wish of our honourable lord, you will become his personal maid. In this way, neither Fujiki nor Komura will be able to object to anything, — Saegusa used a forced explanation as an excuse.

—To serve the lord personally means...

—Obviously, it means receiving the affections of our honorable lord. You should be grateful.

To receive the affections of the lord of the castle was something that any woman who did not already have a husband would gladly accept. Or at least in the case of an ordinary *daimyo*. In the case of Tadanaga, however, receiving his affections was not necessarily a source of joy. Many already

knew that Tadanaga was beginning to show symptoms of a mental illness that was causing him to behave strangely. And there were also countless women who received his affections. Moreover, they were all terrified by Tadanaga's unstable character, and they never knew when he would suddenly change.

Who would wish for such a risky position, where if you disagreed in the slightest with his intentions you could end up losing your life instantly? Saegusa was also aware of this. Every time he sent a woman into Tadanaga's bedroom, he felt sorry for her inside. However, officially he had to tell them: "It is a great honour, you must feel grateful".

And when Kinu answered:

—I refuse.

Saegusa had to roar at her:

—Stupid! Do you think you can oppose the lord's attention and still be alive?

After receiving the authoritative order to be ready when a messenger was sent to her to settle the matter, Kinu left Saegusa's residence. She felt that, due to the sudden turnaround in her fate from the day before, she had lost her ability to think. When she returned to her home in distress, Fujiki and Komura were waiting for her there.

When Komura burst in with an altered face and explained the situation, Fujiki's entire body shook with humiliation and outrage. Precisely because his joy had been so great, that disappointment was so extreme.

—I had already told many people that I was going to marry Kinu. It would be a disgrace to me if I had to say that now, — he said indignantly, but after a long and heated discussion with Komura he concluded, — It is not enough for me just to hear your explanations, I am going to see Kinu in person and ask about her real intentions. Besides, depending on what happens, I will kill you, Komura, or Kinu.

—No matter what happens, I won't let you lay a hand on Kinu. But if you want to face me with a sword, I won't refuse.

—Don't forget those words.

—Of course not.

So the two of them went to Kinu's house and waited for her return.

They were both furious, but before they could open their mouths, the words Kinu spoke felt to them like a jar of cold water.

—Komura and Fujiki: I can no longer become the wife of either of you.

—Kinu, what on earth does that mean?

—Has something happened? Please speak up, Kinu.

At the insistence of both of them, Kinu explained to them resignedly:

—I have to go serve at the castle to attend to our lord. Saegusa has ordered me to do so.

—What?! — Komura and Fujiki burst out with the same intensity and the same word.

—That cannot be. Just yesterday Saegusa told us that it was our lord's wish that you and I be married.

—The lord's wishes change more quickly than time.

—But what does all this mean? It's not a matter of time.

—However much the lord's wishes may be, this nonsense is unacceptable.

—Kinu, do you intend to go to the castle to serve?

—No way, I don't want to go.

As if they had forgotten the quarrel that confronted them until a short while ago, the two young swordsmen insisted Kinu in unison.

—I am the daughter of a vassal of the fief of Suruga, and I also married a vassal of the same fief. Now that I have become a widow, could I refuse our lord's wishes? I do not have the strength to do so, — Kinu's face reflected despair and sadness.

—Kinu, you do not wish to go and serve the castle, do you? — Fujiki snapped in a trembling voice.

—With all due respect, but how could I wish to go and serve at the bed of our half-disturbed lord? I have no choice, however.

—No. There is another way, — Fujiki assured with exceptional determination, — Kinu, run away with me.

—What are you saying, Fujiki? — Komura exploded.

V

Komura and Fujiki accompanied Kinu as the three of them fled the city of Sunpu together. During their heated discussion they agreed that the most urgent matter was to protect Kinu from falling into the hands of the feudal lord. They also swore an oath: once they had left the domain of the Suruga fiefdom behind, they would once again draw their swords to decide who was the best. Furthermore, Komura spontaneously made the decision to renounce his position as a vassal.

As soon as his escape became known, Saegusa began to tremble at the thought of Tadanaga's fury. He immediately dispatched a troop of soldiers

led by Kataoka Kyonosuke to pursue them, but at that very moment he saw Sasahara Shuzaburo, who was on his way to the castle after recovering from his knee injury, and he also dispatched him to lead another troop of pursuers, so he ended up sending two squads.

The troop led by Kataoka caught up with the three fugitives in the afternoon of the next day at Mukadamura, near the Kanbara rest station. As a connoisseur of the talents of Komura and Fujiki, Kataoka reflected on the situation cautiously. If by chance those two were to find themselves in a desperate situation and become violent, they would inevitably cause many deaths and injuries. There was also the possibility that they might not be captured. The first thing would be to try to persuade them ingeniously to return with them to the castle. If that proved to be utterly impossible, they would have to take their time and wait until the second troop promised by Saegusa arrived.

Kataoka stepped off his horse. Komura and Fujiki pulled Kinu back about twenty yards and stood side by side in the middle of the road, showing their unequivocal opposition. Kataoka approached them and calmly tried to convince them:

—This is not good for either of you. It would be best if you returned to the castle city as soon as possible. The lord is a direct descendant of the *shogun's* family. Wherever you go, in Japanese territory you cannot escape the clutches of our lord Tadanaga.

At the mention of the feudal lord's name, Komura showed some hesitation, but Fujiki suddenly replied:

—The doubts about the behavior of the great advisor of Suruga have also reached the government of the shogunate. If he was to try to hunt us down outside the domains of his fiefdom, it would not be in the best interests of the great advisor. Our intention is to put up a strong resistance until we leave the fiefdom.

—I think you're making a big mistake. If the honorable lord has ordered Kinu to withdraw to the castle it is because he was concerned that a dispute might arise between you two.

—You won't fool us. Saegusa made it clear to Kinu that she would have to sleep with the lord.

—That is what Saegusa says, he imagines things that are not the true feeling of our lord. First of all, relax and listen to me. What I am telling you is the result of having been thinking deeply, in the name of our fellowship, how to ensure that none of the three of you get hurt, — Kataoka was apparently speaking without any malice, so they both trusted

him and released their hand from the hilt of their *katana*, — Let us sit here, I want to hear your intentions as well.

Led by Kataoka, the two sat on a rock at the side of the road. Kataoka advised them persuasively to return to the castle city for the time being. Just as Komura was beginning to change his mind, he saw how far the second troop led by Sasahara was riding.

Fujiki brusquely rose to his feet.

—Kataoka, you had it well planned, eh? You were stalling for time until the backup troops arrived, were you not?

—What are you talking about? I was simply speaking to you with the sole intention of getting you out of this one safely, — Kataoka excused himself, but gave up all negotiations.

Sasahara, who had arrived galloping on the back of his horse and wrapped in the dust it raised, shouted at him:

—Kataoka! What are you doing? You are being too lenient. Take those two who have disobeyed the lord's wishes now.

Sasahara was an uncompromising samurai who was completely devoted to his spear. Saegusa had managed to convince him with her explanations that Komura and Fujiki were insubordinates who had opposed the orders of their lord.

Both Komura and Fujiki retreated about fifteen feet and each drew his blade from its sheath.

"There is no other choice", concluded Kataoka.

At once, the soldiers of the castle who had arrived commanded by Kataoka and Sasahara wielded their blades.

—Kataoka, you catch Komura, and if he gives you too much trouble, kill him. I will capture Fujiki, — Sasahara shouted.

A frightening fight ensued. The skill with which Komura's blade faced the twenty or so soldiers who charged him on Kataoka's instructions was spectacular. Just as he was a strange bird that had turned his entire body into a sword, he leapt to the right, ran to the left, attacked forward, and retreated backward in one jump; and with each move he either wounded his opponent or knocked him down, it was utterly impossible to capture him.

As if three, five, eight people had emerged from a single Komura, when it seemed you had it here, it was already on the other side. He jumped in all directions and rotated skillfully.

Instead, the soldiers of the castle who were chasing him were bumping into each other, getting in each other's way and cursing each other.

Seeing that, despite having caused a dozen deaths or injuries already, Komura still did not have a scratch on him, Kataoka whispered in the ear of one of his subordinates:

—I will face him. Surround him from behind without leaving a single space and close ranks, — then he exhorted Komura — Bravo, well done, Komura! It is a waste to cause so many victims, now I will face you.

—Kataoka! I look forward to it.

For the first time Komura's body stood still, turned to Kataoka, and stood on guard. For his part, Kataoka adopted the "hanging thread" stance, which was her strength as an expert in the Nikaido-Gen style. This posture was very appropriate for his personality as it was a technique, so to speak, passive. Maintaining a flexible position like a spider's dangling thread, he would dodge his opponent's attacks until his strength began to fail, then, with a movement faster than even a blink of an eye, he would throw himself at his opponent and knock him down with a single sword strike. After standing still for a while, Komura suddenly began to put into practice the unparalleled speed of offense that was his specialty. And his target was the left side of Kataoka's body. In the duel held in the presence of the feudal lord, Kuroe Gotaro's "flying dragon sword" had stuck into Kataoka's left shoulder and inflicted a deep wound. Komura had quickly realized that, although that wound was now virtually healed, there was a subtle imbalance latent in the left side of Kataoka's body. Kataoka himself was aware that his previously flawless "hanging thread" stance due to his left shoulder wound was now visibly flawed. Komura's tactic of attacking that weak spot proved successful.

When, after Komura's successive attacks on the left side of his body, Kataoka shifted his center of gravity slightly to the left, Komura's blade pointed at his right shoulder and descended upon it. Kataoka was cut from his right shoulder to his ribs.

Almost simultaneously, Kataoka's blade was also aimed at Komura's right shoulder and attempted an equally sharp attack. But simply, Komura's movement was so extremely expeditious that Kataoka's blade could only tear at the neck of Komura's clothing.

—Did you see that?! — Komura shouted euphorically, and jumped back. But there was a trap waiting for him. His jump placed him right in the middle of six swords that were approaching him from behind in a circle. The six blades plunged into Komura's body from both sides and even his back, so that he looked like a pinwheel, and he collapsed.

On the other hand, surrounded by Sasahara's troop, Fujiki Gennosuke was also surprisingly fighting to the death. He applied his secret *nagareboshi*

technique, accompanied by a shout. That magnificent face, which usually looked somewhat sullen, blushed and overflowed with a menacing expression. The single-armed blade became a myriad of sharp blades and he began to dance wildly like a bloodthirsty demon. He wittily weighed his footholds, maneuvered his movements to keep a single enemy always in front of him, and showed no sign of fatigue.

Finally Sasahara, who watched everything on his horse, had no choice but to acknowledge that it would be impossible to capture Fujiki alive.

"All right, I'll have to take that guy down with the tip of my lance."

Wielding his lance, called the "Silver Serpent", firmly in his hands, he called out to his opponent:

—Fujiki, fight me!

—Sasahara, come here!

Fujiki cast a withering glance at Sasahara on his horse and cautiously put his guard up. The opponent was riding on the back of a horse; he could not approach him recklessly and end up at the mercy of the horse's hooves.

For a few moments it seemed that he was scrutinizing the horse and his rider, but suddenly he threw himself to the right side of the animal's neck.

In the duel before the feudal lord, Kutsuki Gannosuke had inflicted a wound on Sasahara's right knee. Though the wound had supposedly healed, Fujiki no doubt sensed that Sasahara's weak spot was in that right leg.

Sasahara's spear had been initiated into the secrets of the Nakamura faction, which had propagated the teachings of the Hozoin school, and was exalted by its exquisite thrust.

He aimed at Fujiki's chest and, from the top of the horse, pushed the scintillating spear and, surprisingly, Fujiki lunged towards the tip of that spear with his left shoulder forward, as if to strike it.

Under normal conditions, the tip of the lance should have stuck directly into the base of the left arm.

In Fujiki's case, however, the arm that should have been there was already gone. The spear just went through and tore Fujiki's sleeve.

Fujiki immediately cut the spear in two. Sasahara had lost the strength to stay in the saddle because of his injured right leg, and when he was in danger of being thrown forward, Fujiki's sword cut off his right leg.

Despite falling to the ground in a hurry, Sasahara drew his short sword and launched into a struggle with Fujiki.

Fujiki's sword stuck in Sasahara's back, which curled up stubbornly, and began to cut. It looked as if it would cut his back in two, but the blade stopped in half: Sasahara's short sword had pierced into Fujiki's side.

Thus, after both the two leaders of the troops and two of the fugitives had been shot down, Kinu brandished a dagger and went on to kill three of the soldiers, but unfortunately not being able to count on a naginata, which was her specialty, she was finally arrested by the soldiers of the castle.

When the pursuing troops returned to the castle town of Suruga carrying a score of bodies (including those of Kataoka, Sasahara, Komura, and Fujiki), Saegusa muttered in horror:

"What a fate. Except for the woman, Kinu, all the swordsmen who took part in the dueling tournament before the feudal lord have died."

Now all that was needed was to send Kinu, whether he liked it or not, to the lord's bedroom. Tadanaga was furious that the woman who had caught his eye had not appeared in his bedroom that night.

—Tonight that woman will accompany you, — they whispered to him.

Tadanaga entered his room at night, looking pleased.

Kinu laid prostrate at the foot of his bed, her hair down and wearing a white silk garment.

—I am going to change my clothes, — said Tadanaga.

There was no answer.

—What has she done?

Tadanaga was standing before Kinu and noticed that the front of the white silk was dyed with fresh blood. He was petrified with his eyes fixed on it. Isoda Kinu, the last survivor of the dueling tournament in the presence of the feudal lord, had taken her own life by stabbing herself in the chest.